

ENVIRONMENT,  
SOCIETY AND  
LANDSCAPE IN  
EARLY MEDIEVAL  
ENGLAND



TIME AND  
TOPOGRAPHY

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Tom Williamson

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Anglo-Saxon Studies 19

ENVIRONMENT, SOCIETY AND LANDSCAPE  
IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

# Anglo-Saxon Studies

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ENVIRONMENT, SOCIETY AND LANDSCAPE  
IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

TIME AND TOPOGRAPHY

Tom Williamson

THE BOYDELL PRESS



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# Introduction

This book is about early-medieval settlement in England, and in particular lowland England. It does not purport to be a comprehensive account of this complex and fascinating subject, concentrating instead on a limited number of themes. It examines such matters as why eastern England in the early Middle Ages was distinguished by complex manorial structures and large numbers of free tenants; why the Midland areas of England came to be characterised by landscapes of large villages, and complex and extensive open fields; and why patterns of Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian influence and settlement took the particular spatial forms that they did. It deals, in short, with questions of regional difference, and attempts to explain some of the most striking geographical patterns in early-medieval England.

Historians and others have often attempted to link various aspects of medieval regional variation, and to establish causal connections between them. Some, for example, have attempted to explain the social idiosyncrasies of eastern England as a consequence of Danish settlement in the ninth century; others have interpreted variations in medieval field systems in terms of the areas settled by particular ethnic groups – Saxons, Jutes, Danes. A long and slightly different tradition has viewed regional variation in both landscape and social institutions as a manifestation of long-term cultural continuities: in G. C. Homans's words, landscapes were 'the engraving of societies older than written history'.<sup>1</sup> Distinct ways of living were continued down the centuries, within strangely stable boundaries, to be manifested in medieval and even post-medieval times in particular inheritance practices, settlement forms and dialects – even in the character of vernacular architecture. Others have postulated rather different kinds of long-term regional continuity, again indicated by the similar distributions displayed over time by a wide range of phenomena – place-names, social institutions, landscape features – and have posited in particular a contrast between the 'core' areas of settlement in Midland England, and the 'wooded peripheries'. It is in the former districts, fully cleared of woodland by the end of the Roman period, that we find the most evidence of early Saxon settlement, in particular in the form of 'pagan' cemeteries, and it was here that the classic medieval landscapes of large villages and complex open-field systems later developed, within an environment which early charters, place-names and Domesday Book all suggest was largely devoid of woodland. In contrast, the scattered farms of 'pioneer settlers' attest the slower expansion of settlement and

<sup>1</sup> G. C. Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1941), p. 13.



cultivation in the more agriculturally 'marginal' regions lying outside the Midland belt. Patterns and distributions of different kinds in the historical and archaeological record have, in other words, been linked in a bewildering number of ways.

In the course of this book I shall examine some of these connections. But my main concern is to demonstrate how these various forms of patterning were, in fact, largely the consequence of environmental factors: of physical geography, of geology and hydrology, of soils and climate. To many, this will seem a rather old-fashioned approach to the past. It is true that the environment has not been totally ignored by those involved in the study of medieval settlement. The idea of 'core' and 'marginal' areas of settlement is itself based on assumptions about the kinds of terrain most inviting to early settlers. But on the whole, detailed examinations of soils, topography, climate and hydrology have not loomed large in recent years in discussions of early-medieval settlement. Instead, historians, geographers and archaeologists, and in particular perhaps landscape historians, have tended to focus their attention almost exclusively on social, economic and demographic drivers, interpreting any patterning which cannot be explained in such terms as a consequence of human choice, political events or random chance. The emphasis has swung, very firmly, in the direction of autonomous social and economic actors: of human decisions apparently taken without much regard for topographic, environmental or agrarian reality. In particular, in the view of many writers, particular ways of organising settlements and fields were imposed on the landscape by great men – kings or magnates – in order to facilitate the extraction of surpluses from a dependent peasantry, and the layout of villages and field systems was often the consequence of deliberate, large-scale planning which was carried out with little regard for soils, topography, water supply or drainage. Landscapes thus reflected the interests of outsiders, not the knowledge and experience of local farmers. In short, while the environment is often implicated in the evolution of settlement, this is usually at one remove, principally as an influence on population pressure. Otherwise, in exploring regional variations in the landscape, the emphasis has been on the role of social institutions and structures of power, the varying geographical character of which are themselves largely left unexplained.

The reluctance of scholars studying early-medieval England to engage with the natural environment is superficially surprising, given the wider public interest in and concern for such matters. Amongst historians, such an approach is perhaps to be expected. The discipline has traditionally been concerned with political events, and with social and economic processes: the study of the environment was left, perhaps wisely, to natural scientists. Amongst archaeologists and geographers such attitudes seem stranger. They may stem in part from the reaction, which gathered pace in the 1980s and 1990s, against the positivist and pseudo-scientific excesses of the 'New' Archaeology, and of the 'New' Geography, with their emphasis on statistics, systems theory, mathematical model-building and the search for

'law-like generalisations' in human behaviour. The post-processual reaction in archaeology in particular was fired by a belief that such approaches were essentially dehumanising because they reduced people to cogs in social and environmental systems, minor components in vast and complex machines. Individuals were thus marginalised in favour of what Thomas described as the 'titanic forces' which surrounded them – demographic expansion, technological innovation, political developments and climatic change.<sup>2</sup> The idea that human activity was 'determined' by the physical world was anathema to such researchers.

Amongst geographers involved in the study of the early Middle Ages such sentiments represented, in addition, a reaction against a rather older tradition, one which had viewed the human landscape as essentially a continuation of physical geography, and which sought to explain the form and location of settlements, for example, in terms of such tangible and straightforward influences as route ways, fording places, junctions of soil types or water supply. Some geographers who became landscape historians almost defined their adopted discipline by reacting against such approaches. The most important example – and arguably the most important influence on the development of landscape history since its inception as a separate discipline in the 1950s and early 1960s – was Christopher Taylor. In his seminal study of the development of settlement in England, *Village and Farmstead* (published in 1983), he typically discussed how the location of settlements owed little to the dictates of physical geography:

The concept of geographical determinism has dogged all studies of settlement since the late nineteenth century when geographers first systematically developed the theory . . . While there are clearly certain general physical determinants which cannot be ignored . . . most of the specific determinants of settlement location are probably not concerned with the physical nature of the site at all . . . the physical nature of the site is of far less importance in the decision to settle there than the human factor.<sup>3</sup>

Such attitudes pervade much research into early-medieval settlement, and while some consideration of geology and soils, and of agrarian conditions more generally, is often presented this is often superficial, employing familiar if vague terms such as 'heavy intractable clays'. Many are essentially defeatist, infused for example with the idea that natural phenomena, such as soils, are complex and varied in character and mapped with insufficient accuracy to constitute a useful tool for understanding the character of medieval fields or settlement, or have been changed over time, by human management or use, to such a degree that modern classifications are of little relevance to earlier periods. 'All discussion of soils is fraught with problems: there are enormous difficulties involved in the processes of field recognition, classification and mapping.'<sup>4</sup> 'Generalizations about the "natural" qualities of soils provide

<sup>2</sup> J. Thomas, 'The Politics of Vision and the Archaeologies of Landscape', in B. Bender (ed.), *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives* (Providence/Oxford, 1993), pp. 19–48.

<sup>3</sup> C. Taylor, *Village and Farmstead: A History of Rural Settlement in England* (London, 1983), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> B. K. Roberts and S. Wrathmell, *Region and Place: A Study of English Rural Settlement* (London,

no easy answers to the problems of settlement history.<sup>5</sup> Little attempt has thus been made to relate the character of fields and settlement to the infinite, complex variety of local and regional environments, and to the kinds of agrarian practices which these engendered. Even such basic matters as the character of local water supplies, and how these might have influenced not only the specific sites for individual settlements, but the nature of settlement within any district more generally, are now deemed strangely irrelevant to the study of past landscapes.

It may be wrong to see the neglect of such matters as simply the consequence of intellectual fashion. Underlying academics' attitudes to the natural environment lie major changes in the way we all live our lives, changes which have served to distance us from the immediacy of nature. As I shall argue, there seems little doubt that the decline of interest in the influence of hydrology on settlement was closely associated with the gradual spread of mains water to almost all parts of England in the course of the twentieth century. And in a more general sense, the fact that most people now live essentially urban or suburban lives – even those who physically dwell in rural areas – may explain why the notion that the complex details of agrarian routines could help explain aspects of the rural landscape has fallen so far from favour. In a similar manner, in a world of 'hyper-mobility', in which travel by aeroplane, car and train ensures that vast distances can be traversed with relative ease, the subtle influence of topography on patterns of movement and contact in the pre-industrial era is easily ignored. All in all, that old truism, that a historian's work tells you more about the age in which he or she lives than it does about the one of which they write, is as relevant to the study of medieval settlement as it is to any other field of historical enquiry. The material world of the distant past can only be reconstructed through a conscious effort of the imagination.

The arguments presented in this volume do not merely involve a reassertion of the importance of physical geography in the shaping of medieval settlement, and to some extent of medieval social institutions. They also, I hope, involve a dissolution of what I believe to be an entirely false dichotomy between 'human choice' and 'geographical determinism'. Of course people 'chose' where to settle – whether we are talking about immigrants arriving in a new country, or individuals selecting sites for new farms. But those choices were conditional. They were only as free as the extent of knowledge, and the constraints of the practical world, would allow. Choices were for the most part intelligently made, by people knowledgeable about material conditions, and the physical results thus reflected, to a significant extent, the spatial character of the natural environment. It could hardly be otherwise: soils, geology and climate cannot of themselves 'dictate' or 'determine' anything much. Landscapes are the consequence of human agency, but agency exercised knowledgeably, in a real world.

2002), p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> C. Dyer, *Hanbury: Settlement and Society in a Woodland Landscape* (Leicester, 1991), p. 10.

## *Introduction*

Examining environmental influences on early-medieval settlement is far from straightforward, and as readers will soon discover this book is not an easy read, lacking the simplicity of some recent texts on the subject. Many readers may, moreover, feel that it focuses too much on a relatively restricted area of lowland England, and especially on the East Midlands, East Anglia, and those parts of the Home Counties lying to the north of the Thames. This last characteristic is, however, unavoidable, for implicit in what follows is the argument that the topography and environment of Britain is so varied that a more geographically comprehensive and balanced examination of these matters is at present beyond the scope of a single researcher or volume. In that sense, the chapters that follow set out broad approaches, rather than supplying a full and inclusive account. My primary intention has been to refocus debates about landscape and settlement in the early Middle Ages, by highlighting a range of issues which have tended to fall from the attention of historians, geographers and archaeologists over recent decades.

# 1

## Settlement and Society

### *Introduction*

Historians, archaeologists and others have suggested a number of key social, economic and technological developments which may have had a determining influence on the emergence of regional variations in the English landscape, and English society, during the early Middle Ages – in the period, roughly, between the fifth and the twelfth centuries. Invasions of people from the Continent, in the fifth and sixth centuries and again in the ninth, may have introduced new customs, social institutions and forms of territorial organisation to particular parts of the country, leading (for example) to different kinds of manorial organisation, or inheritance practices, in Kent or East Anglia. In addition, variations over time and space in population growth have always, and probably correctly, been seen as a major influence on the development of different kinds of landscape in England, although most agree that demography cannot be understood in isolation from technical and agrarian developments, which themselves arguably had a direct and determining influence on the character of settlement and field systems. Related to population change, although never in a very direct manner, was the emergence of successive modes of territorial and political organisation, which at a local level have likewise been implicated in the evolution of fields, settlements and land-use patterns by a number of historians. The purpose of this chapter is to briefly examine some of these suggested influences on the development, over time and space, of social institutions and landscapes.

### *Ethnicity*

The period examined in this book begins with the conventional end of Roman Britain in the early fifth century, which was followed within a few decades by the settlement in lowland England of new peoples arriving from north Germany and southern Scandinavia. The precise scale, and character, of the Anglo-Saxon settlement remain matters for debate, not simply because of the paucity of contemporary written sources but also owing to disagreements over how we should interpret the archaeological evidence. There are major problems in distinguishing those changes in material culture which were a consequence of demographic and economic decline from those which reflect

changes in ethnicity, although the disappearance of town life, the demise of villas, the collapse of a market economy and the end of coinage were all, arguably, essentially economic in character, the consequence of a profound depression associated with the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West. But the character and extent of ethnic change in this period also remains a matter of profound debate.

The appearance of new ethnic groups in England is apparently attested quite clearly by both the historical sources and the archaeological evidence. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, thus describe how England was settled at the end of the Roman period by tribes from north Germany and southern Scandinavia. Bede, writing in the eighth century, relied heavily on a rather vague and confusing tract written in the sixth century by the monk Gildas, called *De Excidio Britanniae et Conquestu*.<sup>1</sup> This describes how, abandoned by the Roman imperial armies, the British under a 'proud tyrant' invited Saxon soldiers into the country to defend them against attacks by Picts and Scots. The Saxons revolted, however, and caused havoc across the country until the British counter-attacked under a leader called Ambrosius Aurelianus. The fight-back culminated in the battle of Mount Badon, where the barbarians were defeated and a period of peace ensued, before the conquest recommenced. Bede placed these events in the middle years of the fifth century, largely on the basis of Gildas's statement that the British had appealed to a Roman commander called Agitus, otherwise unknown but identified by Bede (and many subsequent historians) as Aëtius, a military commander in Gaul who died in 454. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, written down in the ninth century but incorporating earlier material, also provides information about the arrival of the English, some derived from Bede but much from tribal traditions and origin-myths. It also recounts the subsequent battles fought by various groups of settlers with the indigenous British, as well as with each other.

The archaeological evidence appears to complement rather closely these historical accounts. Known Romano-British burials are relatively few in number, and by the fourth century most were unfurnished, ranged east-west and with the head to the west, although whether principally as a consequence of Christian influence remains uncertain. But the fifth century saw the appearance of radically different funerary practices across much of lowland England. Burials were now more likely to be furnished, with weapons, jewellery and other artefacts, and cremation was widely adopted, having largely gone out of fashion in Britain during the second century. The Rev. James Douglas in the late eighteenth century was probably the first person to identify the cemeteries as the material signature of the Anglo-Saxons, partly on the basis that 'They are scattered all over Britain in places which the Saxons occupied, and are not discovered in the parts of Wales that they had not subdued': previous excavators and antiquarians had generally

<sup>1</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom (Chichester, 1978).



identified this material as of Roman date.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that the identification of cemeteries and invaders was generally accepted by scholars, in particular with the publication of John Yonge Akerman's *An Archaeological Index to the Remains of Antiquity in the Celtic, Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon Periods* of 1847.<sup>3</sup> All archaeologists since have agreed that the cemeteries indicate some kind of contact with north Germany and southern Scandinavia, an area which lay beyond the Roman world and untouched by Christian influences, and in which very similar kinds of burial and artefact can be found. Arguments continue, however, about the character of these contacts: over whether the archaeological evidence really reflects, in any simple and direct manner, the events described in the historical sources, and in a more general sense whether the 'settlement' constituted a conquest by a small group of warriors, or a fully fledged folk movement, involving the wholesale replacement of the indigenous population.<sup>4</sup> The idea of a 'mass immigration' was generally supported by early-twentieth-century scholars, including Åberg, Leeds and Stenton, and is still favoured by archaeologists like Anthony and Harke.<sup>5</sup> But by the second half of the twentieth century many archaeologists, including Adams, Crawford, Hodge and Hamerow, were suggesting that the invasion was a small-scale affair, a take-over by a warrior elite, a view which has generally found favour with landscape historians.<sup>6</sup> Some archaeologists have gone so far as to argue that the cemeteries, and the distinctive material culture which they contain, have no necessary connection with immigrants at all, and should be read essentially as a 'cultural package', a collection of styles, beliefs and fashions, which was adopted by indigenous as much as by immigrant communities.<sup>7</sup> In short, no real consensus currently exists over how the archaeological evidence should be interpreted, or more generally about the character of the English settlement

It is in some ways surprising that, in these debates, the spatial distribution of the archaeological evidence has not received more attention. Inhumation and cremation cemeteries of early Saxon date are not found throughout

<sup>2</sup> J. Douglas, *Nenia Britannica: or, a Sepulchral History of Great Britain* (London, 1793), p. 177.

<sup>3</sup> J. Y. Akerman, *An Archaeological Index to the Remains of Antiquity in the Celtic, Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon Periods* (London, 1847).

<sup>4</sup> S. Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death* (Stroud, 2000), pp. 155–73.

<sup>5</sup> N. Åberg, *The Anglo-Saxons in England* (Uppsala, 1926); E. T. Leeds, 'Denmark and Early England', *Antiquaries Journal* 26 (1946), pp. 22–37; F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1943); H. Harke, 'Anthropologists and Migrations: A Problem of Attitude?', *Current Anthropology* 39 (1998), pp. 19–45; H. Harke, 'Kings and Warriors: Population and Landscape in Early Medieval Britain', in P. Slack and R. Ward (eds.), *The Peopling of Britain. The Shaping of a Human Landscape* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 145–75.

<sup>6</sup> W. Adams, 'Invasion, Diffusion, Evolution?', *Antiquity* 42 (1968), pp. 194–215; D. Van Gerven and R. Levy, 'The Retreat from Migrationism', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 8 (1978), pp. 483–532; S. Crawford, 'Britons, Anglo-Saxons and the Germanic Burial Ritual', in J. Chapman and H. Hamerow (eds.), *Migrations and Invasions in Archaeological Explanation* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 45–72; H. Hamerow, 'Migration Theory and the Anglo-Saxon "Identity Crisis"', in J. Chapman and H. Hamerow (eds.), *Migrations and Invasions in Archaeological Explanation* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 33–44; R. Hodges, *The Anglo-Saxon Achievement* (London, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Hodges, *Anglo-Saxon Achievement*.

England, or even throughout lowland England, but only in the eastern and central parts of the country. They are very rare in the western parts of Wiltshire and Warwickshire, and in Somerset, Dorset and Worcestershire; and largely or completely absent from Devon, Cornwall, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire and Cheshire. This pattern is usually assumed to reflect the fact that the conquest of these districts was delayed for some two centuries, only being completed after the English had been converted to Christianity and abandoned pagan burial. But the precise boundary taken by English expansion in this hiatus remains unexplained, as does the hiatus itself.

More intriguing questions surround spatial variations in the character of the cemeteries and in the material culture of those interred within them. Bede, as well as relying on Gildas, also introduced much new material into his account of the settlement, from unknown sources. In particular, in a famous passage he elaborated on the continental homelands of the people Gildas described simply as 'ferocious Saxons':

They came from three very powerful Germanic tribes, the Saxons, the Angles, and the Jutes. The people of Kent and the inhabitants of the Isle of Wight are of Jutish origin, and also those opposite the Isle of Wight, that part of the Kingdom of Wessex which is still today called the nation of the Jutes. From the Saxon country, that is, the district now known as Old Saxony, came the East Saxons, the South Saxons, and the West Saxons. Besides this, from the country of the Angles, that is the land between the kingdoms of the Jutes and the Saxons, which is called *Angulus*, came the East Angles, the Middle Angles, the Mercians, and all the Northumbrian race, as well as the other Anglian tribes.<sup>8</sup>

In the middle of the nineteenth century Roach Smith recognised important regional variations in the character of the cemeteries, and in the artefacts they contained, which appeared to be the material expression of these tribes and their settlement areas.<sup>9</sup> He noted the facts that most examples of a distinctive form of brooch, the cruciform brooch, were concentrated in the Midlands and East Anglia; that a kind of distinctive buckle was found in Kent; while 'saucer brooches' were a feature of the Upper Thames valley – patterns which he thought indicated the territory occupied by Angles, Jutes and Saxons respectively. Cremation, he further observed, was largely restricted to 'Anglian' districts. These ideas were developed further by Wright and Kemble in the 1850s, both drawing on newly excavated material in the German homelands, although a comprehensive and authoritative exploration of the links between the English and continental cemetery material had to await the work of Leeds, whose *Archaeology of the Anglo-Saxon Settlements* was published in 1913, followed by that of Åberg, whose *Anglo-Saxons in England* appeared in 1926.<sup>10</sup> All these scholars noted further forms of metalwork which appeared

<sup>8</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. J. McClure and R. Collins (Oxford, 1994), p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> C. Roach Smith, *Collectanea Antiqua: Etchings and Notices of Ancient Remains* (London, 1850).

<sup>10</sup> N. Åberg, *The Anglo-Saxons in England* (Uppsala, 1926); E. T. Leeds, *The Archaeology of the Anglo-Saxon Settlements* (Oxford, 1913); T. Wright, *The Celt, the Roman, and the Saxon* (London, 1852).



to be associated with one or other of the 'three nations', such as the artefacts called 'wrist clasps' which were characteristic of 'Anglian' areas. Some of these distributions now appear less clear than in the nineteenth century, as a result of new discoveries, but some – especially the marked concentration of large cremation cemeteries in the 'Anglian' areas of England – remain strong.

In the second half of the twentieth century, while archaeologists continued to debate the scale of the Anglo-Saxon settlement, they began to interpret their data in new ways and most came to doubt whether variations in fifth- and sixth-century material culture reflected, in any very simple or direct manner, the settlement areas of distinct ethnic groups. It is, indeed, unlikely that ethnicity and material culture can be linked in such an unproblematic way. Indeed, some archaeologists deny that England was ever settled by coherent 'peoples' in the way suggested by Bede. Nevertheless, the patterns in the archaeological data described above remain, and require some explanation.

Broadly similar arguments, concerning the scale of immigration and the areas principally affected by it, surround the Danish incursions, which, beginning with raiding in the later eighth century, developed into permanent settlement in the mid to late ninth. Such debates have, once again, a long history. The idea of a large-scale folk movement, widely accepted in the early and middle years of the twentieth century by scholars like Davis, Stenton and Dodwell, was challenged by Sawyer in the 1960s, who concluded that even the largest of the Viking armies were 'relatively small, numbering, at most, a few hundred men'.<sup>11</sup> While most archaeologists and historians would today probably accept that there was only a limited influx of new people from Scandinavia in this period – a takeover by an elite – some would still see significant levels of immigration, perhaps a fully fledged 'folk movement'.<sup>12</sup> Once again, as with the Anglo-Saxon settlements, little attention has been paid to the spatial distribution of the evidence for Danish settlement, which in this case mainly takes the form, not of artefacts or cemeteries, but of place-names. The boundaries of Danish influence which these appear to indicate are assumed to be essentially arbitrary in character, the consequence of the chance results of warfare.

Although the identification and interpretation of 'ethnic settlement areas' and related issues currently seem of little interest to archaeologists, these are matters which have traditionally been of some concern to those studying regional variations in the medieval landscape. As already noted, a succession

<sup>11</sup> P. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings* (London, 1962), especially pp. 120–32: quotation from p. 131.

<sup>12</sup> See below, p. 000. The folk-movement view is particularly associated with place-name scholars, and with historians like B. Dodwell: 'The Free Peasantry of East Anglia in Domesday', *Norfolk Archaeology* 7 (1941), pp. 145–57; and F. M. Stenton, 'The Historical Bearing of Place-Name Studies: The Danish Settlement of Eastern England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 24 (1942), pp. 1–24. Amongst archaeologists, supporters of this perspective include the late Sue Margeson: 'Viking Settlement in Norfolk: A Study of New Evidence', in S. Margeson, B. Ayers and S. Heywood (eds.), *A Festival of Norfolk Archaeology* (Norwich, 1996), pp. 47–57. The revisionist view was pioneered by P. Sawyer, *Age of the Vikings* (London, 1962), and R. H. C. Davis, 'East Anglia and the Danelaw', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5 (1955), pp. 23–39. For a more recent review of the debate see D. M. Hadley, *The Vikings in England: Settlement, Society and Culture* (London, 2006), pp. 2–17.

of scholars in the first half of the twentieth century argued that the roots of English cultural variation – embracing manorial structures, field systems, inheritance customs, even forms of vernacular architecture – lay in patterns of Dark Age settlement. Ways of living brought from abroad remained influential for centuries. Some of these ideas have recently been given a new lease of life by archaeologists who, confounded by the apparent lack of correlation between landscapes and aspects of the natural environment – soils, climate and the rest – have begun to look again at the possibility that variations in medieval settlement and field systems, and in the social institutions with which these are associated, may have had very deep cultural roots. These are matters to which I shall return at a subsequent stage: but in a more general sense the spatial aspects of the English and Scandinavian settlement would repay further investigation, not least for the light this might throw on the true character of these processes.

### *Population*

Many facets of early-medieval regionality have been attributed to variations in population density, and in a more general sense historians and archaeologists have seen demography as a key driver of changing forms of settlement. It is therefore unfortunate that our knowledge of this subject is so sketchy. This is mainly because, in the period before Domesday, our evidence is entirely archaeological in character, and produced by field-walking – that is, the systematic examination of the ploughsoil in order to recover evidence of settlements indicated by spreads of artefacts and debris on the surface – and, to a lesser extent, by aerial photography. One problem is that settlements discovered by these methods are hard to date with any degree of accuracy. This is particularly true of the earlier Saxon period, when undifferentiated hand-made wares were in use for several centuries. But even in the Roman period many smaller, poorer sites, represented only by ploughsoil scatters of the ubiquitous but rather undiagnostic grey wares or by crop marks, cannot in many cases be dated even to a particular century. It is thus often unclear how many of the sites dating to a broad chronological period discovered within an area were actually occupied at the same time.

A second problem is that it is extremely hard to estimate the number of people who might have been living on a settlement, even when it has been excavated in its entirety. With sites discovered by field-walking or aerial photography, such problems are multiplied. There will be no neat relationship between the area covered by a 'site', in the sense of the area covered by pottery and other debris, and the number of dwellings which it contained. More importantly, by making quite minor adjustments to assumptions about the character of the inhabitants of the sites recovered – from a nuclear family to an extended one, or by adding a certain number of slaves, for example – an estimated population can be doubled, or tripled, at a stroke. A third difficulty concerns differential visibility. There is no doubt that settlements of Romano-

British date are much easier to find than those dating to the early and (in most areas) middle Saxon periods. Roman sites are usually represented by significant quantities of well-fired, professionally produced pottery, and sometimes by areas of building rubble. Saxon settlements are at best marked on the surface by a handful of poorly fired sherds or – because some districts were effectively aceramic – by none at all.<sup>13</sup> Shennan and Schadla Hall described how, in east Hampshire, the most striking characteristic feature of the Saxon period was ‘its sheer lack of evidence . . . early Saxon pottery in particular seems to decay very quickly in the plough soil and even when present is difficult to detect’.<sup>14</sup> Across Somerset, similarly, little or no pottery was in use on settlements between the late Roman period and the late Saxon, a situation mirrored across much of the west Midlands.<sup>15</sup> In Hanbury in Worcestershire field-walking revealed extensive areas of Romano-British and medieval settlement, while two charters show that the area was settled and exploited in the seventh and ninth centuries: but, in Dyer’s words, ‘if we relied on archaeological evidence alone, we should be forced to conclude that Hanbury was largely uninhabited between 400 and 1100’.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of such methodological difficulties there is general agreement amongst archaeologists and historians over the broad demographic trends of the period between the fourth century and the twelfth. The 1970s and early 1980s saw a large amount of archaeological survey work, which revealed far higher numbers of Roman and later-prehistoric settlements than archaeologists had hitherto suspected, a development which Christopher Taylor christened the ‘quantitative revolution’ in landscape archaeology.<sup>17</sup> The pre-Saxon countryside had evidently been more extensively cleared and cultivated than had hitherto been thought, and a number of scholars suggested that the population in the third or fourth centuries may have exceeded that at the time of Domesday, perhaps by a considerable margin, some suggesting that there were around 4 million people in Britain as a whole in c. AD 300, compared with around 2.5 million in England, and 3.5 million in Britain, in the late eleventh century.<sup>18</sup> Such speculations can now, perhaps, be viewed as an initial and somewhat surprised response to the amount of new data being produced, for even the most basic calculations suggest that the Roman population, in most areas at least, was in fact significantly lower than that of the eleventh century. Foard, reviewing the evidence for Northamptonshire – a particularly well-studied

<sup>13</sup> M. Medlycott and M. Germany, ‘Archaeological Fieldwalking in Essex, 1983–1993: Interim Results’, *Essex Archaeology and History* 23 (1994), pp. 14–17.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, S. Shennan and R. T. Schadla Hall, ‘Settlement History in East Hampshire’, in S. Shennan and R. T. Schadla Hall (eds.), *The Archaeology of Hampshire from the Palaeolithic to the Industrial Revolution* (Winchester, 1981), pp. 106–21, especially p. 119.

<sup>15</sup> S. Rippon, *Beyond the Medieval Village: The Diversification of Landscape Character in Southern Britain* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 41–53.

<sup>16</sup> Dyer, *Hanbury*, p. 19. For the charter, see D. Whitelock (ed.), *English Historical Documents*, vol. I, 500–1042 (London, 1955), pp. 477–8.

<sup>17</sup> C. Taylor, ‘Roman Settlements in the Nene Valley: The Impact of Recent Archaeological Work’, in P. J. Fowler (ed.), *Recent Work in Rural Archaeology* (Bradford-on-Avon, 1975), pp. 109–20.

<sup>18</sup> P. Fowler, *Farming in the First Millennium AD* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 16–18; Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and Place*, p. 43.

county – noted that even if all the Roman sites recovered through systematic field-walking had been occupied at the same time, and each occupied by an average of around twenty people, this would still mean a population around half that implied by Domesday Book – assuming, as many researchers have done, that each tenant recorded in the latter source was equivalent to around 5.5 individuals.<sup>19</sup> In north-west Essex there is a particularly high density of Roman sites – around 1.2 per square kilometre – but again, assuming all were contemporary and occupied by around twenty people, the population would only have been around 75 per cent that at the time of Domesday, assuming once again a modest ‘multiplier’ of 5.5, and less than this if a larger one is employed.<sup>20</sup> It is unlikely that there were many districts in which Romano-British population exceeded that of the time of Domesday.

There is little doubt that a demographic peak some time in the fourth century was followed by a decline which continued into the fifth or sixth centuries. It is true that early Anglo-Saxon sites are less visible than those of Roman date, and that to some extent the apparent reduction in the number of settlements recorded by most field-walking surveys between the later Roman and early Saxon periods may be more apparent than real. But it should also be noted that while most Romano-British sites appear to have been occupied for several centuries, early Saxon ones were more mobile and short-lived in character, lasting for only a few generations before settlement migrated elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the fact that Roman period sites are widely spread across the landscape, as well as being more numerous – being found even on the heaviest clays – while those of earlier Saxon date are largely restricted to areas of well-drained ground suggests that there was, indeed, a significant reduction in population. Although finds of early Saxon metalwork made by detectorists are more widespread than pottery scatters, the difference is not so marked as to throw doubt on the evidence of more traditional forms of survey. Many of the items recovered from the more challenging environments probably represent stray losses unrelated to settlements. On balance, there does appear to have been a major reduction in the number of settlements, and in the size of the population, in the late Roman and immediate post-Roman period.

The chronology of demographic recovery in the course of the Anglo-Saxon period is more uncertain, in part because this may have displayed a degree of regional variation, in part because many districts were effectively aceramic, but also because in many parts of the country it is difficult to distinguish, in field surveys, settlements occupied in the early Saxon period (the fifth and sixth centuries) from those of middle Saxon date (seventh, eighth and early

<sup>19</sup> T. Brown and G. Foard, ‘The Saxon Landscape: A Regional Perspective’, in P. Everson and T. Williamson (eds.), *The Archaeology of Landscape* (Manchester, 1998), pp. 67–94, at p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> T. Williamson, ‘The Development of Settlement in North-West Essex: The Results of a Recent Field Survey’, *Essex Archaeology and History* 17 (1986), pp. 120–32.

<sup>21</sup> Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and Place*, p. 179; Taylor, *Village and Farmstead*, p. 120; H. Hamerow, ‘Settlement Mobility and the “Middle Saxon Shift”: Rural Settlements and Settlement Patterns in Anglo-Saxon England’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 20 (1991), pp. 1–17; H. Hamerow, *Early Medieval Settlements: The Archaeology of Rural Communities in Northwest Europe, AD 400–900* (Oxford, 2002).

ninth centuries). Poorly fired hand-made pottery with few diagnostic features continued to be used over a period of over 400 years. But in East Anglia a more durable form of wheel-turned pottery called Ipswich ware came into widespread use during the seventh century and continued to be produced until the advent of wheel-thrown Saxo-Norman pottery in the second half of the ninth century, thus allowing a broad comparison to be made between early, middle and late Saxon settlement patterns. In many parts of East Anglia such an analysis is also helped by the fact that – in marked contrast to the situation in most areas of the country – the main foci of settlement changed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, so that rather than being obscured – as is so often the case – by modern villages and hamlets, middle and later Saxon occupation is exposed to view, as pottery scatters in the ploughsoil. We cannot be sure that the development of settlement, and the demographic changes which this implies, apparent in East Anglia were shared by other areas of England but given these useful aspects of its archaeological record it seems a good region with which to start.

As elsewhere, known early Saxon settlements are fewer in number than those of Roman date and appear to have been generally mobile and short-lived in character. At Witton in north-east Norfolk, for example, eight Romano-British settlements were discovered through field-walking, but only four areas of early Saxon occupation. Selective excavation and intensive surface collection revealed that only one of these was in use throughout the fifth and sixth centuries. One was occupied in the fifth century, one in the sixth, while the third could not be dated accurately.<sup>22</sup> In most parishes settlement seems to have stabilised at one or, more rarely, two or three points in the middle Saxon period. The spreads of debris representing such settlements, which are commonly located beside what is now the site of the parish church, usually cover a more extensive area than those associated with the more mobile sites they replaced (in part perhaps because they were usually occupied for a longer period of time), generally between 1.5 and 3 hectares. In contrast, later Saxon occupation in a parish commonly covers three or four times this area, and in some cases more, in part because numerous new sites now appeared, away from parish churches, spreading along roads and around the margins of greens and commons. In the parishes of Great and Little Fransham in Norfolk, for example, intensively field-walked by Andrew Rogerson, middle Saxon occupation was represented by a single scatter of pottery covering an area of a little over a hectare. Late Saxon settlement, in contrast, was represented by two main settlements, each covering a similar or slightly greater area, together with no less than sixteen smaller sites scattered across the parish.<sup>23</sup> This dispersal of settlement continued and intensified so that here, as in many parishes across the region, sprawling common-edge and green-edge hamlets, and a plethora of isolated farms and cottages, came to characterise

<sup>22</sup> K. Wade, 'The Early Anglo-Saxon Period', in A. J. Lawson (ed.), *The Archaeology of Witton near North Walsham, Norfolk*, published as *East Anglian Archaeology* 18 (1983), pp. 50–69.

<sup>23</sup> A. Rogerson, 'Fransham: An Archaeological and Historical Study of a Parish on the Norfolk Boulder Clay', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of East Anglia, 1995, pp. 105–8, 123–30, 191.



the landscape. It is true that Fransham largely occupies fairly heavy clay soils and that on lighter land the scale of late Saxon and medieval expansion, starting from a higher base, may have been less. On the other hand, in some East Anglian districts growth during the later Saxon period was even more dramatic, as for example in the northern Fens, or Marshland, where a scatter of small middle Saxon farms, with only occasional larger concentrations of occupation, had developed by the twelfth century into a mass of large villages, common edge settlements and long lines of farms and cottages lining the principal roads and droves.<sup>24</sup> The strong impression gained from East Anglia is thus that the middle Saxon population may have been larger than that of the early Saxon period, but not perhaps by any very great margin; and that the tenth and eleventh centuries saw a major demographic expansion which continued, unabated, into the post-Conquest period.

It is difficult to undertake such an exercise – for all its limitations – in other regions of England, where early and middle Saxon pottery are not so easily distinguished, and where stability of settlement ensures that most or all areas of middle and later Saxon occupation lie hidden beneath modern settlements, although where villages have become deserted a similar scale of expansion from the ninth century is usually indicated. The nucleated village of Wharram Percy on the Yorkshire Wolds for example contained, by the end of the twelfth century, around thirty households; middle Saxon settlement comprised perhaps three or four contemporary scattered farmsteads.<sup>25</sup> It is also clear that the character of early and middle Saxon settlement displayed a significant, and as yet not fully understood, pattern of regional variation. In particular, while in most areas early Saxon sites were small and relatively mobile in character, in a few – as around West Heslerton in the Vale of Pickering – larger nucleations existed which displayed much greater stability in the landscape, apparently a reflection of particular environmental constraints, and opportunities, offered by a location at the junction of chalk wolds and undrained fen on the edge of the Vale of Pickering.<sup>26</sup> However, in most districts which have been systematically surveyed settlements of early Saxon date were small and mobile – and much less numerous and stable than those of Romano-British date. Middle Saxon settlements were, in turn, usually fewer in number, sometimes larger and generally more fixed in the landscape. Expansion through the late Saxon period, and into the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – which involved in many districts the appearance of numerous isolated farms and hamlets as well as the development of large villages – generally produced settlement areas covering three, four or more

<sup>24</sup> R. Silvester, *The Fenland Project No. 3. Norfolk Survey, Marshland and the Nar Valley*, published as *East Anglian Archaeology* 45 (1988).

<sup>25</sup> There were four or five probable middle Saxon sites in all: M. Beresford and J. Hurst, *Wharram Percy: Deserted Medieval Village* (London, 1990), pp. 69–78.

<sup>26</sup> D. Powlesland, 'Early Anglo-Saxon Settlements: Structures, Form and Layout', in J. Hines (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective* (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 101–24. The Roman settlement pattern in the area was also distinctive and unusual, comprising a long, attenuated spread of occupation along the junction of the two environmental zones.

times those of middle Saxon times. We cannot give precise figures to these broad trends: in Fowler's words, 'we do not know how many people were living in Britain in the first millennium AD, at its start, at its end, or at any time in between'. But Fowler suggested, not unreasonably, that following the post-Roman population decline there was a 'long, slow rise in population across the half-millennium or so to 1086, with a quickening during the economic vitality of the century before Domesday Book was compiled'.<sup>27</sup> At this stage, depending on how the figures provided by Domesday are manipulated, there were between 1.5 and 2.25 million people in England.<sup>28</sup> With some possible reverses in the early to mid-twelfth century, the population continued to rise thereafter, peaking in the late thirteenth century at between 4.7 and 7 million.<sup>29</sup>

### *Farming technology*

The significant increase in population during later Saxon times, with an expansion of settlement and cultivation onto heavier soils, has been associated by many historians and archaeologists with a major technological development: the replacement of simple ards by large ploughs equipped with a coulter and mouldboard. An ard was essentially a large pointed stick which was dragged through the ploughsoil. In contrast, a large framed plough with a mouldboard and coulter – wheeled or otherwise – turned a proper furrow. In Banham's words, the crucial feature was 'the curved board which turns the sod, that is, inverts the slice of soil that has been cut by the ploughshare, so that whatever is growing on that slice is now buried, and the soil that was underneath is exposed to the weather, which helps reduce heavy soils, especially, to a tilth suitable for sowing'.<sup>30</sup> Ploughing in this manner also brought benefits on light soils as it served to bury weeds effectively and thus gave young crops a good chance of growing without serious competition. Ploughs and ploughing loom large in discussions of medieval field systems. The fact that the intermixed parcels in medieval open fields took the form of long, narrow, rectangular strips reflects, it has been plausibly argued, the fact that such a shape was particularly suitable for ploughing with a heavy plough, pulled by a large team of oxen, for these animals require a wide turning circle because, unlike horses, they are incapable of crossing their feet. A field of roughly square shape, in contrast, might be more appropriate for an ard because the land would need to be cross-ploughed to prepare it for sowing. In the words of the Orwins, 'open fields could only have attained their final form in association with the mouldboard plough'.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Fowler, *Farming in the First Millennium*, p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and Place*, p. 43.

<sup>29</sup> H. E. Hallam, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1042–1350*, II (Cambridge, 1988), p. 512.

<sup>30</sup> D. Banham, 'In the Sweat of Thy Brow Thou Shalt Eat Bread: Cereals and Cereal Production in the Anglo-Saxon Landscape', in N. J. Higham and M. J. Ryan (eds.), *The Landscape Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 175–92, at p. 185.

<sup>31</sup> C. S. Orwin and C. S. Orwin, *The Open Fields* (Oxford, 1938), p. 39.



Unfortunately, remarkably little is known about precisely when the heavier plough with a mouldboard was adopted in England.<sup>32</sup> Ploughs have left little trace in the archaeological record, as they were made of materials which were either easily recycled, or perishable. A heavy mouldboard plough appears to have been widely used in Roman Britain but not in early Saxon England. By the eleventh and twelfth century, however, documentary sources suggest that large framed ploughs, wheeled and complete with a mouldboard, were again in widespread use. Domesday, while it does not provide any details of ploughing equipment, assumes that a 'normal' ploughteam was composed of eight oxen, implying that such large ploughs were by then ubiquitous. While it is quite possible that not all of these draft animals were employed at the same time (at least two may have been kept in reserve) a full team may well have been used in the spring, when the oxen were weak after a long winter diet of hay, and the soils often wet and stiff, in clayland areas at least. Langdon's research into late Saxon rentals and inventories also suggests a 'normal' team of eight oxen, although both larger and smaller teams are recorded.<sup>33</sup> How long such ploughs had been standard remains uncertain, but it is noteworthy that terms like *bovate* and *carucate*, widely used for units of land division by the eleventh century, relate to ploughs and teams. Fowler, in a detailed review of all the available evidence – archaeological, literary and graphic – has strongly argued that ards only began to be replaced by true ploughs during the tenth century.<sup>34</sup> The widespread adoption of the large plough with wheels and mouldboard would thus represent a revolution in farming which occurred in the course of the tenth and early eleventh centuries, possibly beginning in the later ninth, and it is noteworthy that the earliest clear references to open fields – or at least, to extensive tracts of land cultivated in the form of intermixed strips – come from the middle of the tenth century, as at Charlton in Berkshire, where a charter of 956 describes how 'the said country is not surrounded by fixed limits, but the acres lie next to acres'; or at Avon in Wiltshire in 963, where land was said to be 'mixed in common by single acres dispersed hither and thither'.<sup>35</sup>

The recent discovery of an iron plough coulter in a late-seventh-century context at the early monastic site at Lyminge in Kent has, however, raised some doubts over Fowler's otherwise plausible chronology, although whether the material culture of a specialised and wealthy settlement, whose occupants were in close contact with continental Europe, provides a reliable guide to

<sup>32</sup> The discussion by F. G. Payne ('The British Plough: Some Stages in its Development', *Agricultural History Review* 5 (1957), pp. 74–84) has been superseded by that in Fowler, *Farming in the First Millennium*, pp. 182–204. See also D. Hill, 'Sulh – the Anglo-Saxon Plough c. 1000 AD', *Landscape History* 22 (2000), pp. 7–19.

<sup>33</sup> J. Langdon, *Horses, Oxen and Technological Innovation* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 27, 72.

<sup>34</sup> Fowler, *Farming in the First Millennium*, p. 203.

<sup>35</sup> W. de Gray Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum: A Collection of Charters Relating to Anglo-Saxon History*, 4 vols. (London, 1885–9), nos. 925 and 1120; M. Gelling, *The Early Charters of the Thames Valley* (Leicester, 1979), p. 44; D. Hooke, *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England* (Leicester, 1998), p. 121.

wider agrarian practice is unclear.<sup>36</sup> It is, moreover, anyway possible that the neat division often posited between ard and heavy mouldboard plough actually simplifies a more gradual and complex pattern of development. For example, ards as simple digging sticks drawn by draft animals could have been significantly improved by placing a metal cap over the tip of the share or foreshare, while the addition of 'ears' splaying back from the share or ard-head (of the kind attested archaeologically, but in a Roman context, by an unprovenanced votive miniature from Sussex) would have served, when the implement was tilted to either right or left, to mound the soil up on one side or the other, thus fulfilling in part the function of the mouldboard. In this context it is noteworthy that one of the late Saxon illustrations often referred to in discussions of ploughing technology, from the early-eleventh-century manuscript Harley 603 in the British Library, shows what is clearly a bow ard, but also ridges between the furrows it has just ploughed.<sup>37</sup> In Fowler's words, improvements in plough technology were 'in practice . . . accumulating, perhaps in spurts, throughout the first millennium'.

Either the adoption of a mouldboard plough at much earlier date than historians have until recently assumed, or other significant improvements in plough technology in the course of the middle Saxon period, may explain some significant features of the archaeological record.<sup>38</sup> As already noted, one of the advantages of a mouldboard plough, and probably of the kind of improved ard described above, is that it would serve to bury weeds more effectively than more primitive implements, a significant advantage to the farmer on light land as much as on heavy. This might explain the evidence from the excavated Saxon settlement of Yarn-ton in Oxfordshire, where the excavator noted how there was a marked change in the character of the crop residues from the site in the course of the ninth century, with the proportion of perennial weeds falling dramatically, and those of annual weeds increasing.<sup>39</sup> And in a more general sense evidence for the stabilisation of settlement in the course of the middle Saxon period – the way that farms no longer drifted around the landscape, shifting site every generation or so, but instead settled down in one place – may likewise reflect, at least in part, the use of a more sophisticated type of plough, and thus the reduced need to break in entirely new land from the pastures as existing arable became choked with perennial weeds. While it is thus likely that plough technology gradually improved through the middle Saxon period, it remains probable that the widespread adoption of the heavy mouldboard plough only occurred in the course of the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries. It was, moreover, followed by further changes in the centuries following the Norman Conquest. In 1086 oxen were 'the sole plough animals in use at the time of

<sup>36</sup> *British Archaeology* 118, June 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Fowler, *Farming in the First Millennium*, pp. 200–1.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>39</sup> G. Hey, *Yarn-ton: Saxon and Medieval Settlement and Landscape* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 48–9.

the Domesday survey', at least on the larger holdings and demesnes.<sup>40</sup> But during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the number of horses used for this purpose increased steadily, especially in East Anglia and parts of the south-east.<sup>41</sup>

The available evidence, such as it is, thus suggests that there was a broad measure of synchronicity between demographic developments and changes in ploughing technology. Population fell steeply in the immediate post-Roman period and the fifth and sixth centuries saw, at best, only a slow and gradual recovery: relatively primitive ploughing techniques were employed, arable land use was largely restricted to light, freely draining land, there were extensive areas of grazing land and settlements tended to be relatively mobile in the landscape. The middle Saxon period saw a measure of demographic recovery, perhaps accompanied by major improvements in plough technology, and settlement stabilised: developments which were also part of a complex nexus of change which occurred across much of north-west Europe during the 'long eighth century', and which involved the emergence of more sophisticated polities and a measure of economic expansion, and which a number of landscape historians have seen as having a key impact on the development of the English landscape.<sup>42</sup> But the tenth and eleventh centuries appear to have witnessed a more rapid increase in population, and a much greater expansion of the area under arable cultivation, probably, although not certainly, associated with the wider adoption of a large, framed mouldboard plough.

All this is not to suggest that technological change 'caused', in any simple or direct way, demographic expansion. Improvements in ploughs and the investment they demanded may have been a consequence of the need to bring more difficult land into cultivation as population rose, as much as representing an innovation which allowed such land to be cultivated, and thus encouraged population growth. More importantly, the growth in population and the expansion of the area under cultivation unquestionably had other causes. In particular, and as discussed at greater length in the following chapter, post-Roman demographic developments were almost certainly strongly influenced by changes in England's climate. In the fifth and sixth centuries conditions grew cooler and wetter, limiting agricultural productivity in many districts. But the climate recovered during the later Saxon period, and especially from the later tenth century, and it is probable that some at least of the apparent growth in population in this period can be explained in terms of a resultant improvement in crop yields, greater reliability of harvests and an increase in the area of soils which could be profitably

<sup>40</sup> Langdon, *Horses, Oxen and Technological Innovation*, p. 33.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 254–5.

<sup>42</sup> Most notably S. Rippon, 'Emerging Regional Variation in Historic Landscape Character: The Possible Significance of the "Long Eighth Century"', in M. Gardiner and S. Rippon (eds.), *Landscape History after Hoskins, vol. 2: Medieval Landscapes* (Macclesfield, 2007), pp. 105–21. See also H. Hamerow, *Early Medieval Settlements*, p. 191; and I. Hansen and C. Wickham (eds.), *The Long Eighth Century* (Leiden, 2000).

cultivated.<sup>43</sup> In addition, we should note that the tenth and eleventh centuries also saw significant economic expansion and urban development in England, a process which intensified still further in the post-Conquest period. Because urbanisation involved the emergence of a small but nevertheless significant group of people who were non-productive in agricultural terms it must have served to further stimulate the expansion of agriculture.<sup>44</sup> Lastly, too much emphasis on ploughs can obscure the importance of other developments in the cultivation, storage and processing of crops which appear to have taken place in the middle and later Saxon periods, some of which are clear in the archaeological record, some of which have left little or no trace. Watermills for example may have continued in use from the Roman period into the Middle Ages in parts of western Britain but the archaeological evidence suggests that they were only reintroduced into England in the ninth century: excavated examples include those at Tamworth, of probable mid-ninth-century date, and at Old Windsor in Berkshire, perhaps early tenth century.<sup>45</sup> By the end of the ninth century watermills were appearing on the boundary clauses of land charters; by the time of Domesday, assuming that the mills listed in the survey were indeed mostly powered by water rather than by animal traction, they were widespread in England, present in the majority of townships. The construction of a mill, even the relatively primitive type with a horizontal wheel, involved a significant degree of investment and, so far as the evidence goes, they were only ever built by large landowners. The need to secure a reasonable return upon this investment explains why, at least by the post-Conquest period, one mark of the bond tenant was that he was obliged to have his corn ground in the lord's mill. Mills were not mentioned as one of the essential attributes which were required by the *ceorl* who 'throve to thegn-right', but they were a sign and symbol of seigniorial status, and were often located close to manorial residences.

In short, the causes of population growth, and of the expansion of the area under cultivation, in the course of the early-medieval period were complex, as they appear to have been in other historical periods. While developments in plough technology were clearly important they were not the only or even the primary driver of change. Yet if the causes of demographic change are elusive, its chronology remains relatively clear. Slow recovery in the middle Saxon period was followed, in the course of the tenth and eleventh centuries, by rapid expansion, which continued into the post-Conquest period. In the period between the tenth and the thirteenth centuries England probably became more densely populated than ever before, and our enquiries into the development of rural settlement and landscape should proceed from this observation.

<sup>43</sup> M. E. Jones, *The End of Roman Britain* (Ithaca, 1998), pp. 184–243.

<sup>44</sup> C. Lewis, P. Mitchell-Fox and C. Dyer, *Village, Hamlet and Field: Changing Settlements in Central England* (Macclesfield, 2002), pp. 184–6.

<sup>45</sup> P. Rahtz and R. Meeson, *An Anglo-Saxon Watermill at Tamworth: Excavations in the Boleridge Street Area of Tamworth, Staffordshire in 1971 and 1978* (London, 1992); Fowler, *First Millennium*, pp. 175–7.

*Social structure and territorial organisation*

How resources were exploited, surpluses extracted and elites maintained, the scale of such extractions and the size and character of the elites themselves – all these things might be expected to have had a crucial impact on the development of the physical environment. One major area of debate centres on the extent to which there was ‘continuity’ of social and economic organisation from Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England. Some scholars have argued that villa estates may have developed more or less directly into medieval manors and townships; others, more plausibly, that forms of tribal landholding in the less Romanised districts evolved into the territories which can be discerned in early England.<sup>46</sup> Other researchers, in contrast, emphasise the scale of Romanisation, and urbanisation, in Britain, and thus the magnitude of subsequent decline, arguing that Anglo-Saxon systems of territories and estates, and other social institutions, owed little to the Romano-British past. These latter arguments are perhaps strengthened, and certainly made more complex, by the suggestion that many of the supposedly characteristic features of Roman civilization – and especially urban and villa life – were disappearing or dwindling long before the start of the fifth century.<sup>47</sup>

Whatever their views on these issues, most historians and archaeologists would probably agree that there were profound dislocations in systems of territorial organisation in the fifth century and that in particular the three provinces of Britannia disintegrated into a number of small, autonomous or semi-autonomous tribal territories, each extending over tens or hundreds, rather than thousands, of square kilometres. The names of some of these small tribal groups are mentioned in early documents like the *Tribal Hidage*, a tribute list probably drawn up in the later seventh century for a Mercian king, at a time when the process of state-formation was still been only partly completed, while those of others are preserved in place-names. Only gradually did larger political units develop, as small tribes repeatedly conquered and absorbed their neighbours in what Steven Bassett has aptly described as a ‘glorious knock-out competition’.<sup>48</sup> By the seventh century, through a continuation of this process, the large tribal kingdoms which we meet in the pages of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, such as Mercia and Essex, had begun to emerge, although initially perhaps as loose confederations of tribes under a paramount leader. Thereafter the process of rivalry and struggle continued, and the history of middle Saxon England is dominated by the attempts of the fledgling kingdoms to conquer

<sup>46</sup> R. Finberg, *Lucerna: Studies of Some Problems in the Early History of England* (London, 1964), pp. 21–66; W. J. Rodwell and K. A. Rodwell, *Rivenhall: Investigations of a Villa, Church and Village, 1950–1977* (London, 1986); F. Seebohm, *The English Village Community* (London, 1883), pp. 431–4; J. E. A. Jolliffe, ‘Northumbrian Institutions’, *English Historical Review* 41 (1926), pp. 1–42; G. Jones, ‘Early Territorial Organisation in England and Wales’, *Geografiske annaler* 53 (1961), pp. 174–81.

<sup>47</sup> N. Faulkner, *The Decline and Fall of Roman Britain* (Stroud, 2004), pp. 71–2, 130, 144–6.

<sup>48</sup> S. Bassett, ‘In Search of the Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms’, in S. Bassett (ed.), *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (Leicester, 1989), pp. 3–27, at p. 26.



and control their neighbours, and in some cases to dominate the whole of lowland Britain. Northumbria was the leading power in the seventh century, Mercia in the eighth, and Wessex in the late ninth and tenth, the destruction of the other English kingdoms by the Viking incursions leading ultimately to the unification of England under the West Saxon kings.

Historians have suggested a number of ways in which this steady increase in the size and sophistication of political units in England may have influenced the development of settlement, fields, and the character of the physical environment more generally. One concerns the replacement, in the course of the middle and later Saxon period, of tribute paid in food and services by subjects to tribal kings – *feorm* – which was rather loosely related to notional areas of land, by taxes paid in money, tied more closely and in more detail to landholdings. This shift was a gradual one, well under way before the unification of England – the various regional methods of assessing land and collecting taxes apparent in Domesday, such as the leets of East Anglia, presumably had their origins in the fiscal policies and traditions of the different middle Saxon kingdoms. But it accelerated in the ninth and tenth centuries, mirroring to some extent the growth of a market economy, manifest in such things as the replacement of *wics* or emporia where the production and import of goods was closely controlled by kings, by a system of *burhs*, or markets. By the eleventh century, but arguably by the early tenth, the whole of what was now the unified kingdom of England was divided into shires, subdivided into units called ‘hundreds’ (or ‘wapentakes’ in the north-east), each with its own court, which were divided in turn into a number of townships, or vills, very broadly equivalent – in Midland areas at least – to a village and its arable land. By the later Middle Ages the majority of townships, in lowland areas at least, were also conterminous with an ecclesiastical parish of the same name. Each township was assessed at a certain number of hides or carucates, each contributing the same amount of money each time a national tax, or geld, was called. A number of historians have argued that new forms of taxation were a major influence on the development of medieval field systems. David Hall in particular has argued that the tenurial structure of Midland townships – the number of farms or virgates which each contained – was related to their overall taxation assessment.<sup>49</sup> The scattering of holdings in strips, across open fields, may in part represent an attempt to ensure that an equality of fiscal liability amongst peasant cultivators was matched by an equality of land quality, and thus of the ability to pay.

Most historians and archaeologists would also probably agree that the development of larger polities – kingdoms – in the middle Saxon period, and the subsequent emergence of a unified English state in the late Saxon period, was intimately associated with changes in the character and structure of English society, although their scale and nature, and to some extent their chronology, continue to be debated. The archaeological evidence, principally

<sup>49</sup> D. Hall, *The Open Fields of Northamptonshire* (Northampton, 1995), pp. 82–94.

from fifth- and sixth-century cemeteries, suggests that some degree of social stratification existed from the time of the Anglo-Saxon settlement but the late sixth and seventh centuries appears to have witnessed greater polarisation, involving the emergence of petty tribal kings and local dynasties.<sup>50</sup> The earliest surviving law codes, dating from the seventh century – those of the Kentish kings Æthelberht, Hlothere, Eadric and Wihtræd, and of Ine of Wessex – reveal a society divided into three principal groups: *eorls* or *gesiths*, the nobility; *ceorls*, the peasantry; and *theows*, slaves.<sup>51</sup>

The principal debate amongst historians concerns the character of the second of these groups. One tradition, exemplified by the writings of Seebohm (1883) and Aston (1964), holds that *ceorls* were in effect analogous to the villeins of the twelfth and thirteenth century, that is, they were unfree cultivators living on estates – manors – and held their land from a local lord in return for specified services, including labour services.<sup>52</sup> The other, associated in particular with the historian Stenton and more recently presented in particularly articulate form by Ros Faith, argues that *ceorls* were, in middle Saxon times, effectively free peasants who held their own land and owed dues and obligations only to the king, obligations which included the supply of food rents and service in the *fyrð* or militia.<sup>53</sup> Dependent tenants were restricted to the *inland*, the cores, of large estates: the wider *warland* was occupied by tenants owing lighter burdens, of a non-servile character. Only gradually did the status of these free *ceorls* decline, in part because of the emergence of increasingly professionalised and well-armed fighting elites, in part due to the development of more complex political structures funded by increasing levels of taxation, and in part as a consequence of other social and economic developments. To Faith, the majority of English peasants were still, to a significant extent, free even in the tenth and eleventh centuries, although their social and economic status may have declined significantly. Even the evidence often quoted by advocates of ancient manorialism from the late Saxon documents relating to Tidenham in Gloucestershire can be interpreted as revealing not a classic manor, but an estate comprising a core of inland, comprising the holdings of dependent *geburs* and demesne land, and a larger area of outlying *warland* occupied by individuals described as *geneats* owing cartage and transportation duties, rather than agricultural labour.<sup>54</sup> Other historians, however, while accepting the general notion of a decline in peasant freedom, would place the emergence of a dependent

<sup>50</sup> C. J. Arnold, *An Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England*, 2nd edn (London, 1997), pp. 199–205; H. Harke, 'Early Anglo-Saxon Social Structure', in Hines (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century*, pp. 125–70, especially pp. 149–51.

<sup>51</sup> Harke, 'Early Anglo-Saxon Social Structure', 146; D. Hadley, *The Northern Danelaw: Its Social Structure, 800–1100* (Leicester, 2000), pp. 66–7.

<sup>52</sup> Seebohm, *English Village Community*; T. H. Aston, 'The Origins of the Manor in England' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 8 (1958), pp. 59–83.

<sup>53</sup> F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1943), pp. 274–7; R. Faith, *The English Peasantry and the Growth of Lordship* (Leicester, 1997).

<sup>54</sup> R. Faith, 'Tidenham, Gloucestershire, and the History of the Manor in England', *Landscape History* 16 (1994), pp. 39–51.



peasant class rather earlier, pointing to the evidence of documents like the *Rectitudines Singularum Personarum*, a tenth-century text describing the rights and obligations of workers on an estate, which appear to indicate the existence of a largely semi-servile agricultural population.<sup>55</sup>

In part, differences of emphasis may reflect the particular geographical biases of historians, for while it is true that in most districts the farming population comprised, by the time of the Conquest, villeins, cottars or bordars who held their land in return for services which might reasonably be described as servile in character, over large areas of eastern England a significant group of what appear to be free men – termed *liberi homines* (free men) and *sochmanni* (sokemen) by Domesday – also existed, and these only disappeared, and even then not entirely, in the century or so following the Conquest. Given that historians do not, for the most part, accept that these were the descendants of ninth- or tenth-century Viking immigrants, as was once suggested, they must presumably represent survivors of an indigenous free peasantry,<sup>56</sup> although why they should have become concentrated in the eastern parts of England is an issue which most appear reluctant to address, and one to which I shall return.

On balance, there seems every reason to believe that the ancestors of many of the peasant cultivators of inferior status found elsewhere in the country by the eleventh century – the villeins and bordars of Domesday, the *geburs* of documents like the *Rectitudines* – were once of similar character, and that in the seventh and eighth centuries the majority, although never all, of the farming population had perhaps enjoyed an even better social position. In this context, we should also note again that seventh- and eighth-century law codes show that *ceorls* had the obligation to serve in the *fyrð*, and thus possessed the right to bear arms and presumably an ability to use them, a role more appropriate to free landholders than to bondsmen. They also, like their social superiors, possessed a *wergild*, a notional value which had to be paid to their kin if they suffered violence, a system of local justice difficult to square with a society dominated by lords and magnates. None of this, it should be noted, is to deny that servile or semi-free elements also existed amongst the population from an early date. But the assumption of the law codes, at least in the period before the ninth century, seems to be that the majority of the peasant population owed dues and obligations directly to the king alone, and not to an intermediate class of territorial lords. It is thus likely that the majority of early and middle Saxon settlements recovered by field-walking, or which have been excavated, represent the homes of such people. Single farms or small clusters of farms, they were perhaps occupied by members of the same kin-group, although each individual residence was probably the home not of an extended family, but of an individual farmer and his immediate family, together with some servile dependants – *læts* or

<sup>55</sup> P. D. A. Harvey, 'Rectitudines Singularum Personarum and Gerefa', *English Historical Review* 426 (1993), pp. 1–22.

<sup>56</sup> Hadley, *The Northern Danelaw*, pp. 91–2.

*theows*.<sup>57</sup> The individual 'halls' found on such sites were, that is, 'the normal dwelling of the freeman'.<sup>58</sup>

### *Multiple estates and their fission*

Changes in the composition and structure of society *per se* have perhaps been of less interest to historians of the landscape than related developments in systems of territorial organisation, for the decline in peasant freedom was allegedly associated with the emergence of relatively small estates – manors under the control of a local resident lord or *thegn* – in place of the much larger economic territories which had existed in middle Saxon times. In their interpretations these latter units, and of their dissolution, landscape historians have drawn heavily, perhaps too heavily, on the models developed in the 1960s and 1970s by the historian Glanville Jones.<sup>59</sup> His research was based in Wales, but the early forms of territorial organisation which he recognised there were similar in many ways to those identified in Northumbria and Kent by Joliffe, and Jones argued that they had Celtic origins and had once been ubiquitous in Britain.<sup>60</sup> In essence Jones suggested that, before the development of localised manors, the countryside had been divided into extensive territories which each contained a number of economically specialised sub-units, with associated settlements. As well as providing sustenance for their own inhabitants these also supplied particular goods and services to the estate centre or *caput*. Some were primarily arable in character – often those which were located near to the centre of the estate – while others were essentially pastoral, or involved in the production of wood and timber. The component settlements were economically inter-dependent, to some extent, as well as contributing surpluses to the estate centre. According to this model, such large estates were originally royal – the patrimony of tribal kings – although they might be granted out for periods of time as the endowment for a warrior in the king's retinue. Gradually, however, they became permanently alienated, as noble families or monastic institutions gained full rights of ownership over them; and once alienated, especially into secular hands, they tended to fragment, as portions were sold or granted away, or as they were divided by inheritance. Even when they remained in royal hands, some portions often

<sup>57</sup> Harke, 'Early Anglo-Saxon Social Structure', pp. 141–2; Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and Place*, pp. 177–8.

<sup>58</sup> P. V. Addyman and D. Leigh, 'Anglo-Saxon Houses at Chalton, Hampshire', *Medieval Archaeology* 16 (1972), pp. 13–31, at p. 24.

<sup>59</sup> G. R. J. Jones, 'The Multiple Estate as a Model Framework for Tracing Early Stages in the Evolution of Rural Settlement', in F. Dussart (ed.), *L'habitat et les paysages ruraux d'Europe* (Liège, 1971), pp. 251–67; G. R. J. Jones, 'Multiple Estates and Early Settlement', in P. H. Sawyer (ed.), *Medieval Settlement: Continuity and Change* (London, 1976), pp. 15–40; G. R. J. Jones, 'Early Customary Tenures in Wales and Open-Field Agriculture', in T. Rowley (ed.), *The Origins of Open Field Agriculture* (London, 1981), pp. 202–25.

<sup>60</sup> J. E. A. Joliffe, *Pre-Feudal England: the Jutes* (Oxford, 1933); J. E. A. Joliffe, 'The Era of the Folk in English history', in *Oxford Essays in Medieval History Presented to H. E. Slater* (Oxford, 1934), pp. 1–32.

became detached, as lesser men gained proprietorial rights over them, either by grant or usurpation.

Jones's model has been embraced and employed by a number of landscape historians and much effort has been expended in the reconstruction of archaic estates, something which has become almost a cottage industry in landscape studies. Hints of the earlier existence of such territories are supposedly provided by certain kinds of place-name, such as those suggesting that a settlement had specialised economic functions (Chiswick, the 'cheese farm') or which describe a settlement in terms of its geographical location in relation to another, presumably more important, place (Norton, Weston, Sutton, etc.). Clues are also provided by archaic dues and duties still owed by one place to another late in the Middle Ages; long after outlying areas had been alienated, a measure of administrative or jurisdictional authority over a portion of their inhabitants was sometimes retained, especially when the estate core had remained in royal hands, and we find that ancient estate centres often became the meeting place for hundreds or wapentakes, and gave their names to them.<sup>61</sup>

In addition, the configuration of early territories can also be detected in ecclesiastical arrangements. This is because the progressive fission of secular units in the course of the Saxon period was mirrored in the development of ecclesiastical territories. In the first two or three centuries following the Conversion relatively few churches existed, generally referred to by modern historians as *minsters*. Each served an extensive *parochia*, usually with a team of priests. As the population grew, and as large estates fragmented into smaller units, the new proprietors – local lords – erected new churches, which developed into parish churches.<sup>62</sup> These were intended to serve the owner and his family, and also the spiritual needs of the inhabitants of his estate. In the more densely settled areas of England this process was well advanced by the time of Domesday (although less so than the fission of secular territories). But once again, the pattern of minster *parochiae* can often be reconstructed through the residual obligations owed by 'daughter' to 'mother' churches. Particular kinds of dedication, and particular features of construction and location, can also provide hints about the early status of particular churches. This is important in the reconstruction of ancient estates because the development of secular and ecclesiastical territories was linked in a number of ways. The early minsters were, not surprisingly, often located close to or at the centres of large estates: *parochiae* and estate were originally, in many cases, the same. Identifying the sites of minsters and their territories can thus help us identify early estates, and *vice versa*. Moreover, because the pattern of medieval parishes often 'ghosted' that of earlier estates – as local thegns (or on occasions groups of smaller proprietors) built churches and endowed them with land and tithes from their own lands – the arrangement

<sup>61</sup> T. Williamson, *The Origins of Norfolk* (Manchester, 1993), pp. 94–100.

<sup>62</sup> R. Morris, *Churches in the Landscape* (London, 1989), pp. 93–167; J. Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005).

of parish boundaries can also on occasions suggest that several contiguous parishes originated through the fission of one larger, earlier territory.

Territories approximating to Jones's 'multiple estates' have been identified in a range of contexts. In Cornwall, for example, David Harvey has discussed how early-medieval economic organisation was based on large units of land, in 'a territorial scheme for the full exploitation of the landscape through the integrated estate management of specialised elements', involving transhumance, a system which was later replaced by a more localised system of manors, exploiting more local resources. Stephen Bassett has identified large early estates in Essex and elsewhere, Peter Warner has discussed such territories in eastern Suffolk, while broadly similar archaic units have been recognised in Norfolk and Hertfordshire.<sup>63</sup> There are, however, problems with these kinds of studies which are not always sufficiently appreciated, or at least emphasised, by those involved in them.

To begin with, it is often assumed that the direction of territorial development was universally in the direction of fission – from large territories to small – whereas there is abundant evidence that large territories could be created over time, especially by ecclesiastical houses, through piecemeal acquisition. The will of the noblewoman Æthelgifu, drawn up around 970, thus describes lands in Hertfordshire, Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire which were so widely scattered, even within individual counties, that they can never have formed, or been descended from, a single unitary territory.<sup>64</sup> Yet even the large unitary estates which existed by the tenth or eleventh centuries did not necessarily represent survivors from the remote past. This was true even of those which were the property of large monastic houses, able to withstand many of the forces of fragmentation to which lay properties were subject and thus particularly likely to represent units of extreme antiquity. In 1066 St Albans Abbey lay at the centre of a vast and continuous tract of land in west Hertfordshire but the surviving charters leave no doubt that this had largely been assembled piecemeal, through the gifts of a number of different individuals in the course of the tenth and eleventh centuries, and was not in its entirety an ancient estate with middle Saxon origins.<sup>65</sup> We should also perhaps note that renders of food and services from tenants to a distant estate centre could persist well into the Middle Ages, especially in the case of permanent institutions like monastic houses, and do not necessarily represent the survival of archaic systems of surplus extraction associated with 'multiple estates'. Even in the thirteenth century the tenants of Therfield in Hertfordshire had to supply a 'farm' including flour, meal, malt, peas, cheese, bacon, honey, butter, eggs, hens, geese, sheep, lamb, and beef to their

<sup>63</sup> D. Harvey, 'The Evolution of Territoriality and Societal Transitions in West Cornwall', *Landscape History* 19 (1997), pp. 13–24; S. Bassett, 'Continuity and Fission in the Anglo-Saxon Landscape: the Origins of the Rodings (Essex)', *Landscape History* 19 (1997), pp. 25–42; P. Warner, 'Pre-Conquest Territorial and Administrative Organisation in East Suffolk', in D. Hooke (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Settlements* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 9–34; Williamson, *Origins of Norfolk*, pp. 92–104; T. Williamson, *The Origins of Hertfordshire*, revised edition (Hatfield, 2010), pp. 115–63.

<sup>64</sup> J. Crick (ed.), *The Charters of St Albans* (Oxford, 2007), no. 7.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56–91.

lords, the monks of Ramsey Abbey in Cambridgeshire, as well as undertake carrying services to Cambridge, Ware and London.<sup>66</sup> Some Cambridge colleges continued to have rents paid in food, rather than money, well into the post-medieval period: as late as 1782 Trinity received a rent from the manor of Cronshams in Thriplow paid in wheat, malt, capons and chickens.<sup>67</sup>

Archaic renders made by one place to another are thus not in themselves evidence for the existence or configuration of middle Saxon estates; fission could clearly be followed by reassembly, as much as by the development of a pattern of smaller estates or manors; and the apparent traces of early territories provided by patterns of tenurial dependency, both ecclesiastical and secular, by place-names and by the configuration of parish boundaries have perhaps been used without due caution by many researchers in the past, including myself. As Dawn Hadley has warned:

This combination of evidence can provide a persuasive picture of territorial organisation at an early date, especially when different kinds of evidence reveal the same pattern. However, the patterns to emerge are not always so neat. Moreover, we must question just what it is that we are reconstructing . . . By combining different types of evidence we may be identifying not the earliest units from which all other estates were eventually carved, but rather the end-products of generations of fragmentation and amalgamation of estates.<sup>68</sup>

But there are other, perhaps more serious, difficulties with the way the multiple-estate concept has been used and interpreted by landscape historians. Ros Faith has recently commented that Jones's model, based so heavily on the detailed terms laid down by Welsh medieval law codes, is 'too fiscal, too royal, too mathematical, and above all too *Welsh*'.<sup>69</sup> Related to this is the failure on the part of some historians to appreciate the true scale and character of the system outlined by Jones, and thus its similarity to modes of social and economic organisation which are, in fact, perfectly well described in early English sources.

In using Jones's model many historians have come to employ the term 'multiple estate' to mean an extensive territory with economically inter-dependent sub-units. But in the thirteenth-century Welsh law codes upon which Jones based his ideas – themselves ideal representations of administrative reality – the term *maenol*, translated by Jones as 'multiple estate', is actually used for a *component* of such a territory. In the Book of Iorweth, a major source, four vills (each made up of a number of homesteads) are thus said to make up one multiple estate; twelve multiple estates, together with two royal vills, constitute one *commote*; while two commotes make one *cantref*.<sup>70</sup> In each *cantref* the king had direct control over only the four royal vills, two in an upland

<sup>66</sup> W. Page (ed.), *Victoria County History of Hertfordshire*, vol. III (London, 1912), p. 279.

<sup>67</sup> S. Wittering, 'Enclosure in South Cambridgeshire: Society, Farming and the Environment', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of East Anglia 2008, pp. 18–19.

<sup>68</sup> Hadley, *The Northern Danelaw*, pp. 91–2.

<sup>69</sup> R. Faith, 'Forms of Dominance in the Early Medieval Landscape', *Medieval Settlement Research Group, Annual Report 23* (2008), pp. 9–13, at p. 9.

<sup>70</sup> Jones, 'Multiple Estates and Early Settlement', p. 9.

location – for use as a summer grazing ground – and two in the lowlands. Of the multiple estates, eight were assigned to the king's bondmen, two to his chancellor, and two to his greater reeve, but the rest were occupied by the heads of free kin groups. Both bond and free estates rendered food rents to the king, with the former providing in addition accommodation on royal progresses. It was thus the *cantref* which was the large territory: the multiple estate was one of its components. In the Book of Iorweth each of the latter is said to extend over only 1,024 customary acres, and while it is difficult to provide an accurate equivalent in modern measures the law-makers clearly had in mind a unit comparable in size to the average English township or parish, or perhaps some subdivision of this. The *cantref*, in contrast, was more like the medieval English hundred. Indeed, the Welsh *can* means 'hundred' and in legal terms the two units, right through the Middle Ages, fulfilled similar roles.

Looked at in this way, the Welsh law codes describe a situation in which large territories, roughly the size of English hundreds or wapentakes, had a central royal *caput* to which the inhabitants, most of whom were members of free lineages, contributed food rents and services. Some portions, however, were retained in royal hands and were used either to endow administrators or as places whose bond inhabitants supplied accommodation and particular services. All this is remarkably similar to the systems of territorial organisation based on royal villas which appear in the law codes, charters and other documents relating to England in the period before the ninth century. In the words of Campbell, 'an English *villa regis* was not a great estate in the sense of a discrete block of land owned and exploited in special ways. Rather it was the centre of a fairly wide area all or most of whose people owed something to it'.<sup>71</sup> Many of these places retained their importance as centres of local government into the late Saxon period, as meeting places for hundreds. While the king's household was sustained in part from the exploitation of the villas which he retained in his own hands, the food rents (or *feorm*) rendered by the wider population of *ceorls* were also crucial. Those due from an estate of 60 hides at Westbury on Trym in the late eighth century are described in a charter as comprising two tuns of clear ale, one 'cumb' of mild ale, one of British ale, seven oxen, six wethers, forty cheeses, thirty 'ambers' of rye corn, and four 'ambers' of meal.<sup>72</sup> In addition, the free population dwelling in the district dependent on each royal villa was also obliged to work on specific projects. A charter for Hanbury in Worcestershire, dating to the time of Wiglaf of Mercia (827–39), thus refers to their duty to erect buildings on royal settlements, while later documents mention bridge-repairs and the construction of defences, and sometimes carrying and carting services.<sup>73</sup> The 'multiple estate' model set out by Glanville Jones, in other words, probably describes a system of territorial organisation very similar to that which is

<sup>71</sup> J. Campbell, *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London, 1986), p. 109.

<sup>72</sup> Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, pp. 467–8.

<sup>73</sup> Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 289; H. P. R. Finberg, *The Early Charters of the West Midlands* (Leicester, 1961), p. 101; Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, pp. 477–8.



clearly indicated in indigenous English sources from the period before the ninth century, and one which is perhaps not best described as a form of 'estate'. It was in essence an area within which free peasants, in some sense proprietors of their own land, owed *feorm* and other obligations to a royal estate centre. Some sections of this territory were directly controlled by the king, as part of the royal demesne, but most were not.

While the broad kinds of obligations owed by the free peasantry to the king seem to have been universal in England from an early date their precise character – the ways in which they were rendered, and to whom – will have changed over time, especially as population increased, larger kingdoms emerged and society became more stratified in character. As Hadley has noted, as small kingdoms were amalgamated into larger ones the accumulated food rents due to the royal household would have been more than its members could possibly have consumed.<sup>74</sup> In a similar way, as the extent of the territory under the control of a particular king grew it became less possible, or necessary, to directly exploit all the various dependent villas under his control, by lodging at each in turn. Queens, sub-kings, and members of cadet branches of the king's own lineage may have had their own households, and been allocated the food-rents due to particular royal villas.

Landscape historians have often discussed the fission of the multiple estate, and the impact that this and the resultant proliferation of localised territorial lordships may have had upon the development of settlements and field systems. Jones argued persuasively that the disintegration of these territories came about as they passed out of the hands of royal families, firstly into the possession of monastic houses, later into that of great magnates.<sup>75</sup> They were then vulnerable to subdivision through divided inheritance, or through the sale or exchange of particular portions. Landscape historians and others have suggested a number of consequences, especially relating to the emergence of nucleated villages and extensive communal field systems. Firstly, fission brought the old economic interdependency of arable and pastoral villas to an end. All territorial units had now to be economically self-sufficient, with important consequences for the organisation of fields and settlements.<sup>76</sup> Secondly, as territory passed into the hands of local lords, the status of the free peasantry declined. The new class of local landowner attempted to maximise production on their demesnes, and to impose labour services on the local inhabitants. A free peasantry became, by the later Saxon period, predominantly semi-free, a development which may in turn have facilitated the reorganisation of fields and settlements.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Hadley, *The Northern Danelaw*, p. 62.

<sup>75</sup> Jones, 'Multiple Estates and Early Settlement'; P. H. Sawyer, 'Medieval English Settlement: New Interpretations', in P. H. Sawyer (ed.), *English Medieval Settlement* (London, 1979), pp. 1–9, at p. 7.

<sup>76</sup> H. S. A. Fox, 'Approaches to the Adoption of the Midland System', in Rowley (ed.), *Origins of Open Field Agriculture*, pp. 64–111.

<sup>77</sup> Brown and Foard, 'The Saxon Landscape', p. 91; T. Saunders, 'The Feudal Construction of Space: Power and Domination in the Nucleated Village', in R. Samson (ed.), *The Social Archaeology of Houses* (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 181–96.

Tenure and inheritance

Yet once again it is arguable that changes in the landscape in the course of the middle and later Saxon period are better understood by examining such documentary evidences as we have for the development of systems of land tenure in early Saxon society, rather than by importing in a wholesale manner idealised models based largely on Welsh evidence. Crucial here is the distinction between what Old English documents describe as *boc land*, 'bookland', and *folcland*. The meaning of these terms is to some extent contested by historians.<sup>78</sup> There is, however, broad agreement that bookland was, at its simplest, land which was granted to an individual or institution by a *boc* or charter. It is sometimes assumed that all of the territory concerned was then held as something akin to private property, in the modern sense, and that it included land occupied by the peasants dwelling within it and who were thus – or became at this point – tenants without proprietorial rights. But in middle Saxon times at least the sheer extent of the territories which were often granted makes it clear that this cannot have been the case. So far as we can tell, the early kings themselves did not possess property rights of this kind, on this scale. What was mainly being transferred were the majority of the royal rights over the tract in question, the food-rents and services owed by the free inhabitants of the *warland*, reserving to the king, in most if not all cases, their obligations to serve in the *fyrð* and to work on bridges and fortifications. Stronger rights, more proprietorial in character – over land and its inhabitants – were also being transferred, but these only concerned that minority of the territory which constituted royal demesne – that is, the *inland* townships occupied by bond tenants and the royal vill itself.

Bookland as a form of tenure had another important aspect. Contemporary documents, and in particular the texts of the charters themselves, make it clear that land held in this way was exempt from the normal rules of inheritance which applied to *folcland*, allowing individuals to dispose of their land as they desired, rather than keeping it within a family or kin group. One of the oldest surviving West Saxon charters, for example, dating to 778, granted a large estate at Bedwyn in Wiltshire to a *comes* or *minister* of King Cynewulf called Bica and expressly states that the land could henceforth be exchanged, given, sold or bequeathed to whoever he desired.<sup>79</sup> Charters had originally been developed to allow land to be granted in perpetuity to the Church and many, even if ostensibly granting land to a layman, were in fact freeing land from both royal dues and claims from kinsmen so that it could be then granted to the Church in perpetuity.<sup>80</sup> In contrast, the precise manner in which folkland was inherited is unclear. This was a matter for custom, and familiar to all, and thus never clearly articulated in our surviving sources. The very term 'folkland' suggests, however, that in origin it was

<sup>78</sup> Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 303–13; S. Reynolds, 'Bookland, Folkland and Fiefs', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 14 (1991), pp. 211–27.

<sup>79</sup> Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 307; Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, no. 225.

<sup>80</sup> Reynolds, 'Bookland, Folkland and Fiefs', p. 216.

not simply a species of land which passed within a family from generation to generation according to customary rules of inheritance. It was land over which the folk, in the sense of an extended family, had both an interest and rights, and on analogy with the situation in various parts of Britain later in the Middle Ages this might originally have involved something more than a simple, equal division between surviving sons. The Welsh law codes, for example, describe how amongst the free kin group or *Gwely*

A proprietor's rights were exercised conditionally on behalf of his descendants, and freedom to dispose of land was severely restricted by a complex of customs. These were designed to perpetuate hereditary succession so as to preserve continuity of control by the agnatic lineage over the hereditary land as a whole.<sup>81</sup>

This could, in some circumstances, involve division not simply between sons, but between the brothers of the deceased, and between their sons as well as his. Although by the later Saxon period there is no evidence that such wider division was regularly practised, it is clear that extended kin groups could retain a keen interest in how a patrimony was divided amongst heirs. Indeed, well into the tenth century there were disputes over whether particular properties making up a legacy represented folkland or bookland. In her will drawn up in c. 970, for example, the great noblewoman Æthelgifu described how the estates therein listed were those which 'her lord bequeathed for her to give to whom she wished, which her lord's kinsmen did not allow her. Then she produced an oath at Hitchin, twenty hundred oaths: there were included Ælfere and Ælsige *cild* and Byrnric, who was then reeve, and all the chief men belonging to Bedford and Hertford, and their wives . . .'<sup>82</sup> However, there are very few clear or unequivocal references to folkland by this time. More and more of the land in the hands of great proprietors was held as bookland, and while wealthy men might continue to possess an interest in their family land, their principal property comprised portions of bookland which they had acquired during their lifetimes, or inherited.

We should not, it must be emphasised, posit a contrast between folkland which was partible in character, and bookland which was inherited by primogeniture. An individual *could* leave bookland to an eldest son, but only if he chose so to do, and the evidence suggests that few people did so choose. Most, like King Alfred, decided to divide their inheritance amongst a wide range of relations, but on their own terms.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, in general the texts of Anglo-Saxon wills – which by definition only dealt with property of this kind – suggest in Holt's words that 'a testator assumed that the land and rights of which he could dispose should properly be distributed within the kin, and the kin for this purpose included not only his son and widow, but his daughter and son-in-law, brother and nephews, and other

<sup>81</sup> G. R. J. Jones, 'Field Systems of North Wales', in A. R. H. Baker and R. A. Butlin (eds.), *Studies of Field Systems in the British Isles* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 430–79, at pp. 433–4.

<sup>82</sup> Crick, *Charters of St Albans*, no. 7.

<sup>83</sup> Reynolds, 'Bookland, Folkland and Fiefs', p. 217; R. Faith, 'Peasant Families and Inheritance Customs in Medieval England', *Agricultural History Review* 14 (1966), pp. 77–95, at p. 80; Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 492.

kinsmen . . .<sup>84</sup> Estates held as *bocland* may have been less prone to fission than those which constituted *folcland*, but the difference was probably not very great.

Where partible inheritance, even if only between sons, was practised, large properties were always in danger of disintegrating into smaller ones. Three generations of familial fecundity could easily divide a reasonably large estate into numerous small farms. Moreover, as Runciman argued in an important article in 1984, the period between the eighth and the eleventh century was for many other reasons a period of increasing social mobility, allowing some members of the peasant class to acquire large amounts of land while encouraging the decline of others into bondage.<sup>85</sup> The growth of the Church, and an expansion in the complexity of royal government, both increased the possibilities of upward promotion for the gifted or industrious. War opened up vacancies at the top, as well as causing personal disasters which could destroy a peasant's livelihood and force him into dependence upon another man. The possibility of upward mobility even into the thegny class is attested by the famous clause in the late Saxon tract relating to status and rank, often referred to as the *Gepyncðu*, which describes how a peasant obtaining 5 hides of land, 'a bell and a castle-gate, a seat and special office in the king's hall', was henceforth entitled to the rights of a thegn. Growing social complexity, the emergence of new career paths as craftsmen, burgesses, bailiffs, all provided opportunities to thrive, just as poor harvests or disease in livestock provided, as they had always done, routes to failure.<sup>86</sup> All this was compounded by the fact that a free market in land seems to have developed in this period. All this suggests that in the period before the Norman Conquest English society, while strongly stratified, was more fluid than it was to become, and that there was much less of a neat or permanent division between a lordly elite and a peasantry. Families could pass with reasonable rapidity up and down the social scale as a result of accidents of procreation and survival, ability and luck.

Many landscape historians have assumed that this gradual decline in the status of the free *ceorl* was associated with the dissolution of the 'multiple estate': that is, the gradual granting away of large royal estates to lay proprietors, and their subsequent fragmentation, created a new class of local lord, the thegns who appear prominently in the documentary record from the eighth century.<sup>87</sup> Manorialism, that is, developed from above, was something imposed on a peasantry which, as far as the model is concerned, was essentially undifferentiated. But if, as I have argued, the multiple-estate model as

<sup>84</sup> J. C. Holt, 'Feudal Society and the Family in Early Medieval England, 1: The Revolution of 1066', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 33 (1983), pp. 193–221.

<sup>85</sup> W. G. Runciman, 'Accelerating Social Mobility: The Case of Anglo-Saxon England', *Past and Present* 104 (1984), pp. 3–30.

<sup>86</sup> Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 468; H. R. Loyn, 'Gesiths and Thegns in Anglo-Saxon England from the Seventh to the Tenth Century', *English Historical Review* 70 (1955), pp. 529–49.

<sup>87</sup> Jones, 'Multiple Estates and Early Settlement', pp. 32–4; Sawyer, 'Medieval English Settlement: New Interpretations'.

usually employed represents a misunderstanding of the real character of early territorial organisation, and if the inhabitants owing services to royal villas were largely free, and their status largely unchanged by the diversion of *feorm* and services away from the Crown, then the progress towards manorialism may often have taken a more complex course. While some of the manors we meet in the pages of Domesday Book originated as bond townships on ancient royal estates, and others may have arisen through the gradual suppression of the rights of *ceorls* on alienated estates, especially perhaps where these remained for long periods in the hands of the Church, many were probably formed as successful *ceorls* acquired more land than they could farm themselves, and offered the surplus to less fortunate individuals of the same social group in return for a rent, paid in part in labour. But such a development, as I shall argue, did not occur to the same extent in all parts of England; and the spatial variations in tenurial structures which were thus produced were effectively frozen by the social and tenurial changes which occurred in the wake of the Conquest, when primogeniture became the normal custom amongst major landholders, the free market in land was curtailed and the disintegration of large estates thus restricted.<sup>88</sup> Only those with smaller properties, the free peasantry who were a particular feature of eastern England, continued to practise partible inheritance. But by this time the majority of cultivators held their land as *geburs* – as villeins, bordars or cottars – and their property descended according to the rules of the estate upon which they dwelt.

### *Conclusion*

The foregoing discussion has identified a number of key developments in the character of early-medieval society which scholars have considered particularly important in the development of English settlement and the English landscape. My treatment of some of these matters is relatively uncontentious: few are likely to disagree that there was a significant demographic decline in the late Roman or immediate post-Roman periods, or that the subsequent demographic recovery accelerated from the ninth century. Others issues I have merely touched on at this stage, flagging them up as areas for further consideration, most notably the question of the character of the Anglo-Saxon settlement in the fifth and sixth centuries and the extent of 'continuity' in systems of territorial organisation, subjects considered in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4. My approach to some topics, however, may appear more controversial, especially the suggestion that the multiple-estate model often employed by landscape historians is to an extent misleading and simplistic.

All these issues, and others concerning the development of early-medieval landscape and society, are usually studied without considering their geographical contexts. Beyond noting that population densities were

<sup>88</sup> Holt, 'Feudal Society and the Family', p. 197.

generally lower in the wetter north and west of England, that Anglo-Saxon settlers did not for a long time penetrate far into the Highland Zone and avoided intractable clay soils, debates about the character of early England have generally been carried out in a kind of environmental limbo. As we shall see, when early-medieval institutions and landscapes are examined within the contexts of the natural environment – of geology, topography and climate – a mass of new light is cast upon their character and development. Before examining the issues raised in this chapter in more detail, therefore, we need first to look briefly at matters of physical geography.



## 2

### Nature's Frame

#### *The geological structure of England*

The basic geology and physical geography of England, let alone of Britain, displays an extreme complexity which is born not only of the varied ways in which rocks were first formed, but also of the various subsequent processes of uplift, distortion and erosion, which operated across almost unimaginably long periods of time. But we may begin by making the old-fashioned but nevertheless useful distinction between the Highland Zone and the Lowland, traditionally if crudely separated by a line drawn from the mouth of the River Exe in Devon to that of the Tees in Northumberland. The areas to the north and west of this line are, in terms of their 'solid' or bedrock geology, dominated by old and often hard, erosion-resistant rocks, thus giving rise to elevated terrain. Some of these formations are volcanic – metamorphic or igneous – in character, most notably those which form the Cambrian mountains and the high moorlands of Devon and Cornwall.<sup>1</sup> Others are sedimentary, that is, they were laid down through processes of gradual deposition and compression in Palaeozoic times, from the Pre-Cambrian to the Carboniferous period – that is, more than 360 million years ago. These include the Carboniferous limestones of the southern Pennines and the Mendips, and the millstone grit of the northern Pennines, which were formed at a time when a warm shallow sea covered most of Britain. Yet in spite of these and other ranges of imposing uplands the term 'Highland Zone' is slightly misleading, if applied in a blanket fashion to the entire north and west of England, for there is also much low-lying countryside here, most notably in the west Midlands plain. This comprises most of Staffordshire and Worcestershire, extending north-west into Cheshire (and also to the south-east of the Tees–Exe line, into Warwickshire, Leicestershire, and Nottinghamshire), and is underlain by rocks of Permian and Triassic age, mainly the Keuper marls (so-called) and sandstones, laid down in desert conditions, something which has given these formations their distinctive red hue: similar rocks occur in low-lying parts of Somerset and Devon.

The solid geology of the Lowland Zone, in contrast to that of the Highland, is characterised by softer rocks, more prone to erosion, which were formed during and after the Jurassic period (Figure 1a). Following the end

<sup>1</sup> E. H. Francis, 'Igneous Rocks', in P. McL. D. Duff and A. J. Smith (eds.), *The Geology of England and Wales* (London, 1992), pp. 489–510.

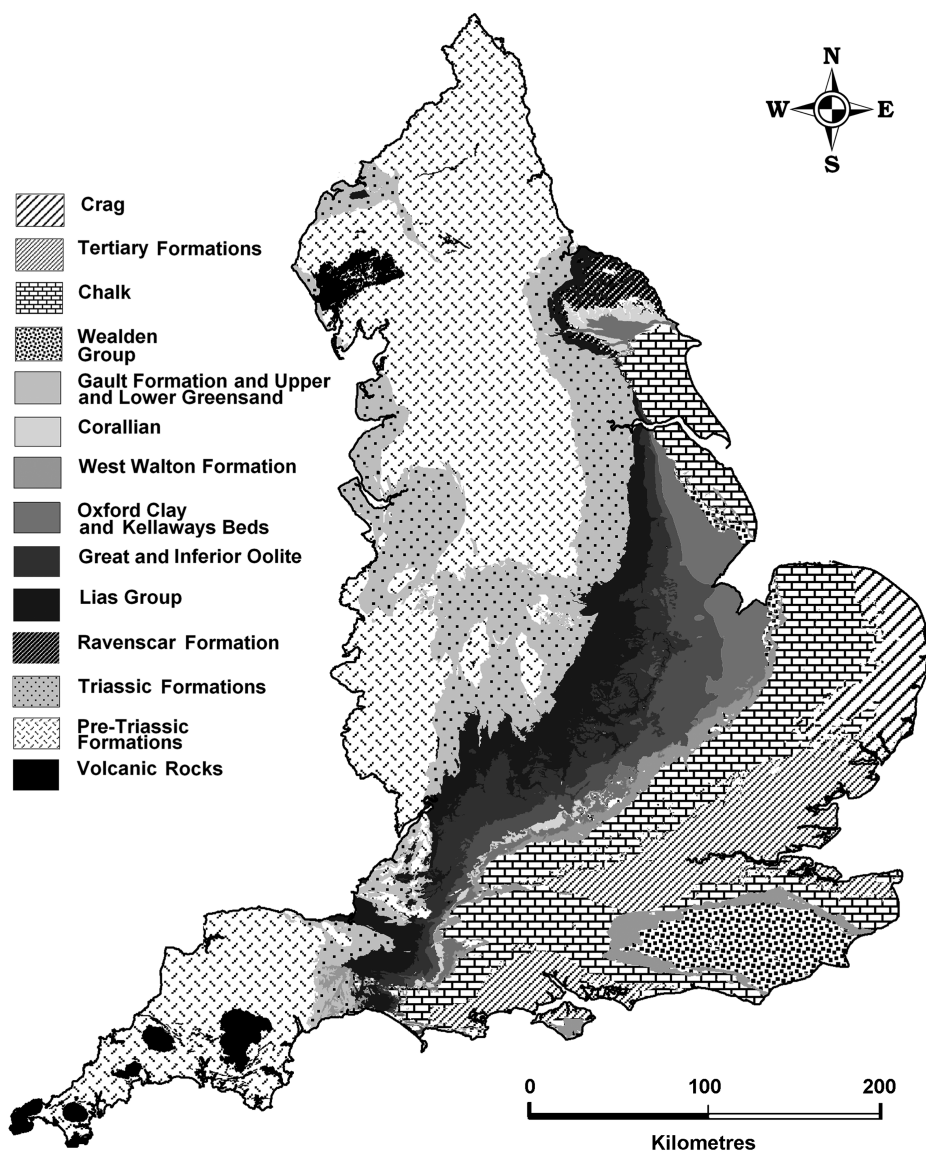
of the Triassic period, around 250 million years ago, a shallow sea gradually extended across the whole country, on the floor of which alternating layers of clays, shales, sandstones and limestones were gradually laid down: an important succession of formations to which we shall return, and which are now particularly well represented in the Midland counties. The oldest, the Lias, mainly comprises thick masses of mudstone, with interbedded layers of limestone and sandstone. The Oolite, lying above it, principally consists of layers of limestone, which have given us the Cotswold Hills and their extension to the north-east, but also includes some clay strata. Above this are the pebbles of the Kellaway beds, with the masses of stiff Oxford clay above them; the Corraline limestone; and then the West Walton formation, comprising mudstones with some intercalated sandstones and limestones.<sup>2</sup> By late Jurassic times there had been further changes in relative land–sea levels, and southern Britain comprised a low-lying land with numerous lakes, and crossed by many large rivers, which laid down the next formations in the sequence, the sandy deposits known as the Lower and Upper Greensand. But in the succeeding Lower Cretaceous period, which began around 200 million years ago, there was a further phase of marine inundation and the stiff blue Gaul clay was deposited in a deep, warm sea. This sea then became shallower and chalk – a soft white limestone – gradually formed in great thicknesses from the bodies of millions of protozoa, especially foraminifera, compressed on the sea bed.<sup>3</sup>

All these various Jurassic and Cretaceous formations outcrop at the surface, albeit often in relatively restricted areas of Midland, southern and eastern England: for instead of the oldest simply being hidden by later deposits the different layers were subsequently tilted and warped, especially during the later Eocene and Oligocene, a development mainly but not exclusively associated with the major earth movements resulting from the collision of the European and African tectonic plates, which saw the emergence of the Alps (the Alpine orogeny).<sup>4</sup> They were then subject to erosion, some – the softer clays – more vulnerable in this respect than the limestones and sandstones. The result was often ‘scarp-and-vale’ countryside, in which the alternating strata are tilted and eroded in such a fashion that each has a relatively steep escarpment overlooking older rocks below, and a dip slope which falls away more gently until buried beneath the escarpment of the next formation in the sequence. Most of the English Midlands is dominated by this kind of structural geography, although its details are often obscured by the activities of streams and rivers.

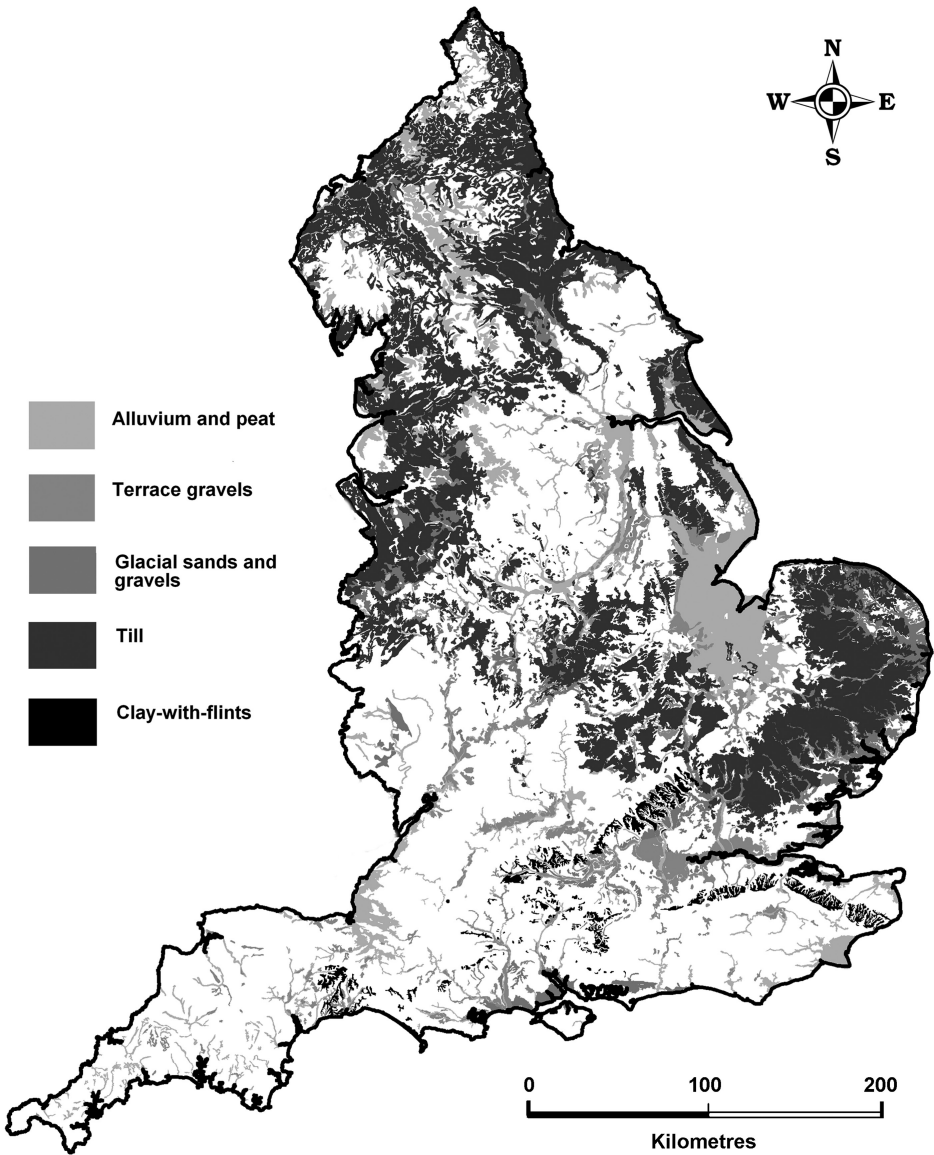
<sup>2</sup> A. Hallam, ‘Jurassic’, in Duff and Smith (eds.), *Geology of England and Wales*, pp. 325–49; S. P. Hesselbo, ‘Late Triassic and Jurassic: Disintegrating Pangaea’, in N. Woodcock and R. Strachan (eds.), *A Geological History of Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 314–38.

<sup>3</sup> P. F. Rawson, ‘Cretaceous’, in Duff and Smith (eds.), *Geology of England and Wales*, pp. 355–82; A. S. Gale, ‘Early Cretaceous: Rifting and Sedimentation Before the Flood’, in Woodcock and Strachan, *Geological History*, pp. 339–55; A. S. Gale, ‘Late Cretaceous to Early Tertiary Pelagic Deposits: Deposition on Greenhouse Earth’, in Woodcock and Strachan, *Geological History*, pp. 356–73.

<sup>4</sup> A. Goudie, *The Landforms of England and Wales* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 138–45.



**Figure 1a.** Simplified map of the solid geology of England.



**Figure 1b.** Simplified map of the superficial geology of England. The glacial till shown here mainly comprises boulder clay but, in parts of East Anglia especially, also includes extensive areas of sandy or silty wind-blown deposits.

The last and most southerly of the Midland escarpments is that of the chalk, which forms a long range of hills, the Chilterns and their continuations to the north-east – the so-called ‘East Anglian Heights’ – and to the south-west – the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs. To the south and east the dip slope of the chalk falls away gradually to a considerable depth but is then bent upwards again, thus forming two deep basins – the Hampshire and London basins – which are filled with more recent deposits.<sup>5</sup> South of the London basin, in south-east England, the chalk originally rose again in a great dome, before falling towards what is now the English Channel, but this has been eroded so that two prominent escarpments – the North Downs looking south, and the South Downs looking north – now face each other across an area of earlier formations. These comprise a margin of Lower Greensand, and a central rather complex mixture of clays and sands of the Wealden Formation, which were deposited in a freshwater estuary in Lower Cretaceous times. These formations are intermixed in a complex manner and have been extensively eroded, and do not for the most part display neat scarp-and-vale topography.

The deep basins in the chalk, centred on London and Hampshire, are filled with Tertiary deposits comprising complex sequences of clays, sands and gravels, which were laid down between c. 65 and 2 million years ago, in varied estuarine and marine conditions. They include the Thanet Sand Formation; the gravels, silts, sands and clays of the Lambeth Group (the Reading, Woolwich and Upnor Formations); the London clay; the sands and clays of the Bagshot Formation; and the Camberley sands.<sup>6</sup> These, once again, do not give rise to classic scarp-and-vale countryside, and the appearance of the various formations on the surface is mainly a consequence of patterns of erosion by the Thames and its tributaries, and by various rivers draining into the North Sea (in the case of the London basin), and by the Frome, Avon and Test (in the case of the Hampshire basin). In eastern Norfolk and Suffolk the Tertiary deposits lying above the London clay have been eroded and this formation is instead overlain by the ‘Crag’, a sequence of sandy and shelly marine deposits laid down in cooling conditions at the end of the Tertiary and the start of the Quaternary. These are the most recent of the ‘solid’ geological formations found in England.

The solid geology of England is thus – even presented in this over-simple fashion – complex, but its main features can perhaps be summarised as follows. To the north and west of a line drawn roughly from the Exe to the Tees the rocks are generally old and hard, ensuring that much of the land lies above 200 metres OD, although there are also extensive lowlands, the most important of which are formed in rocks of Permian and Triassic age, principally in the gently undulating plain of the west Midlands. Immediately to the south and east lies a wide tract of countryside covering much of the

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 146–7; A. E. Truman, *Geology and Scenery in England and Wales* (London, 1949), pp. 79–91, 105–21.

<sup>6</sup> D. Curry, ‘Tertiary’, in Duff and Smith (eds.), *Geology of England and Wales*, pp. 389–410.

central and eastern Midlands, in which the rocks are arranged as a series of inclined plains, forming curving escarpments and dipslopes ranged roughly south-west to north-east, and which comprise alternating bands of clays, limestones and sandstones of varying thicknesses. This tract is bounded to the south-east by the long escarpment of the chalk, which effectively divides the Midlands from the south and south-east of England, and from East Anglia. The dipslope of the chalk falls away and is buried deeply beneath sands, gravels and clays of Tertiary age, but to the south of the Thames it rises again, forming two sides of a great eroded dome, the centre of which is occupied by Wealden sands and clays of comparable date to the Midland deposits, but of freshwater origin and not arranged as a pattern of clear parallel scarps.

These patterns of solid geology, complex enough in themselves, are further complicated by the effects of the Quaternary glaciations. As well as extensively eroding the high ground in the north and west of Britain, and creating that range of characteristic geomorphological features which, to my generation at least, will be familiar from school ('U-shaped valleys', cwms and corries, and the rest), the ice sheets deposited large amounts of material across the lowlands which is generally referred to as 'drift' (Figure 1b).<sup>7</sup> In many districts this has buried, often to a considerable depth, the 'solid' rocks. The most important form of drift is the so-called 'boulder clay', a varied range of clays containing a variety of rocks (derived from the ground across which the ice had moved), usually interbedded with lenses of sand and gravel. But there are also extensive deposits of purer sands and gravels, some left by meltwaters running out from the ice fronts, some re-deposited as existing glacial deposits were reworked by some subsequent cold phase. In addition, beyond the ice fronts themselves – in a tundra environment – high winds deposited areas of sand and, in some districts, a fine silty material called *loess*; existing landforms were meanwhile modified by permafrost conditions, in which the surface, thawing seasonally above ground permanently frozen, slipped and flowed on even quite minor slopes, or heaved to form patterns and pits. Lastly, overlying the chalk in many parts of southern and south-eastern England is the enigmatic 'clay-with-flints' and related deposits, probably the residues of overlying Tertiary formations. During the Anglian glaciation, from around 450,000 to 400,000 years ago, ice covered the whole of England to the north of the Thames; the Wolstonian saw ice advance as far as the south Midlands and into the western half of East Anglia; while the Devensian ice was largely limited to the north and west of the country, with a subsidiary ice front just clipping the coasts of Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, and the northern edge of Norfolk.

Much of the material deposited by the ice sheets was relatively thin and has since been eroded. Glacial deposition is most significant in East Anglia, where the majority of Norfolk, Suffolk, northern Essex and north-east Hertfordshire are covered in various forms of drift laid down in the Anglian

<sup>7</sup> Goudie, *Landforms*, pp. 35–112; G. S. Boulton, 'Quaternary', in Duff and Smith (eds.), *Geology of England and Wales*, pp. 413–39.



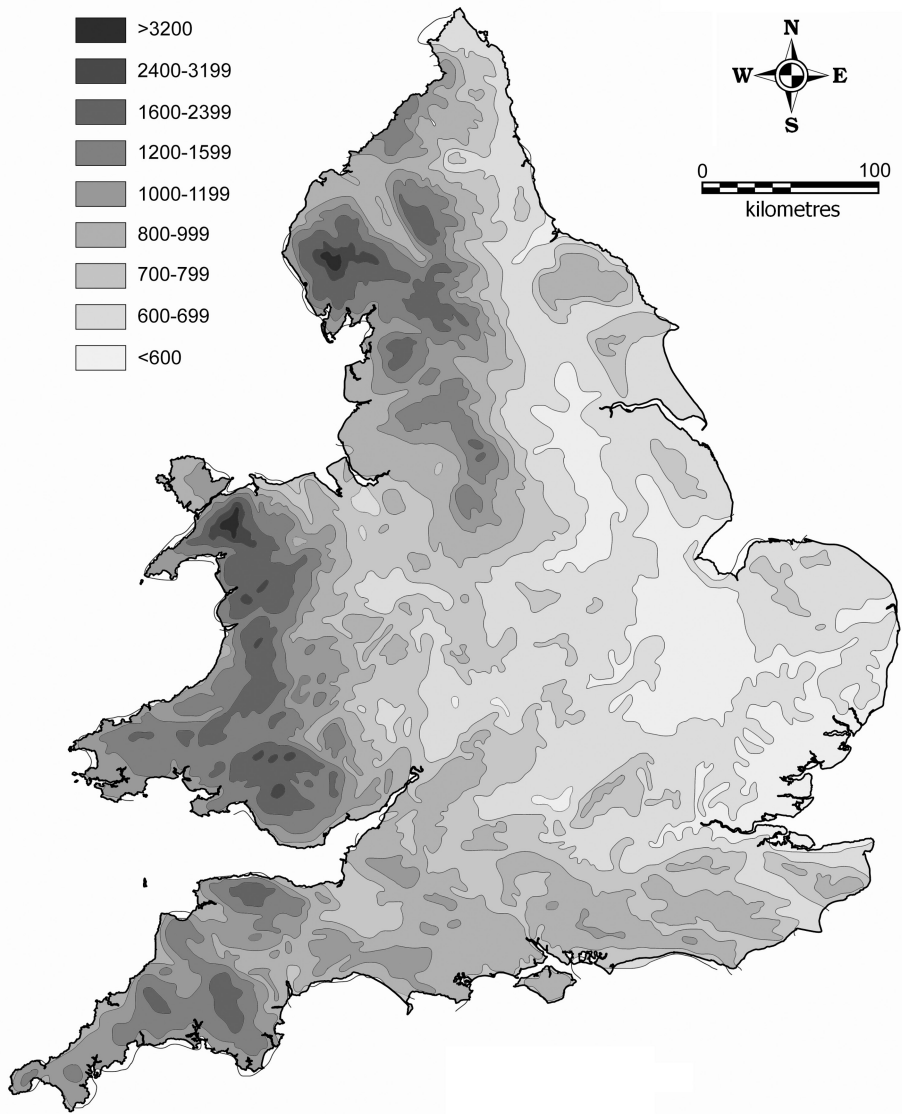
glaciation, and in particular by boulder clay, which forms an extensive dissected plateau overlying the chalk and, to a lesser extent, the crag and London clay. Further areas of Anglian boulder clay, much reworked by the Wolstonian glaciation, also occur in the Midland counties, occupying the higher ground and overlying rocks of Jurassic age. More continuous tracts, much of it of Devensian date, occur in Cheshire and Shropshire, here mainly overlying Triassic rocks. These modifications of and additions to the solid geology were in many areas crucial in the development of early-medieval settlements and field systems.

Despite often being ignored in studies of medieval settlement, some general grasp of England's geology is essential. Rocks affected topography, and thus climate, and were also the major influence on the character of soils – all of which had a major influence on patterns of early farming and settlement. Geology was also of crucial importance in determining the availability of water, and the particular character of the supply, a major if often neglected influence on patterns of settlement. Moreover, because it was the principal influence on topographic form, geology also had a major impact on patterns of contact and movement, and thus on the spatial organisation of past societies – even if these patterns were often related in complex and indirect ways to the basic configuration of rock types.

### *Climate and soils*

The second great influence on the character of medieval settlement was climate; and the single greatest influence on England's climate is the Atlantic Ocean, which serves to buffer it, cooling it during the summer and warming it in winter, thus ensuring a range of temperatures which is significantly less than those experienced in the adjacent areas of Europe.<sup>8</sup> The marked variations in climate within England are, in large measure, a function of distance from the Atlantic, from which direction the majority of air masses come. But they are also related to height above sea level and to latitude. In general, western districts of England are milder and wetter than those in the east, in part because they are closer to the ocean but also because of topography, for the large areas of high ground encourage precipitation. The east, in contrast, being lower, lies in the rain shadow of the western hills (Figure 2). Moreover, because it is protected from the warming influences of the ocean and the North Atlantic Drift it has a more continental climate, with a greater range of daily and seasonal temperatures, and is more affected by continental air masses. This ensures that while *average* temperatures over the year are higher in the west, between June and September the south-east is exposed to warm, dry air and thus experiences the highest *summer* temperatures. In

<sup>8</sup> D. Wheeler and J. Mayer (eds.), *The Regional Climates of the British Isles* (London, 1997); E. Barrow and M. Hulme, 'Describing the Surface Climate of the British Isles', in M. Hulme and E. Barrow (eds.), *Climates of the British Isles, Past, Present and Future* (London, 1997), pp. 33–61; <http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/climate>, accessed October 2011.



**Figure 2.** Average annual precipitation in England, in millimetres, based on late twentieth-century Meteorological Office data.

addition to this broad east/west difference there is also a significant north/south variation. In part as a direct function of latitude, but also in part (once again) because of the more elevated terrain, northern regions tend to be cooler than southern, and also wetter, something compounded on a regional basis by the east/west distinction just noted, so that (in particular) north-east England is exposed to polar air mass which brings cold dry

air in the winter. All this ensures, as I shall explain in more detail a little later, that the south and east of England are in general better suited to the cultivation of grain crops (especially wheat and barley) than the north and west, largely because of the low levels of spring and summer precipitation and high late-summer temperatures, although there are many localised variations. Even with modern agricultural technology land use is largely determined by climate, with arable farming strongly concentrated in the south and east of the country and livestock production in the north and west, not only on high ground but also in lowland areas, as across much of Somerset and Cheshire.

Of course, as we are today only too aware, the climate is not stable over time, and there were unquestionably important fluctuations during the Anglo-Saxon period, and especially at its start. Reconstruction of pre-medieval climatic conditions relies on a range of environmental evidence, much of it European rather than specifically British or English, including that provided by varves (seasonal lake sediments), by dendrochronology, by variations in the proportion of  $O^{18}$  in Greenland ice, by the ebb and flow of glaciers in Switzerland and Scandinavia, by the presence of 'recurrence surfaces' in peat bogs and by variations in the halogen content of sediments within the lakes found in Cumbria and elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> These varied sources all indicate that – following a marked climatic downturn during the early and middle Iron Age, when conditions had become wetter and colder and settlement to some extent retreated in the uplands – Roman Britain experienced a fairly benign climate, which doubtless encouraged population growth and the expansion of cultivation in more marginal terrain. But, in Jones's words, 'the generally favourable climate of the Roman period became abruptly cooler in the first decade of the fifth century', and distinctly wetter as well.<sup>10</sup> The onset of cooler conditions may have begun slightly later than this, and there was certainly a period of particularly cold conditions around AD 540, possibly associated with a phase of volcanic activity.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Usefully summarised in Jones, *End of Roman Britain*, pp. 186–243, although P. Dark, *The Environment of Britain in the First Millennium* (London, 2000), provides more up-to-date evidence. See also A. T. Wilson, 'Isotope Evidence for Past Climatic and Environmental Change', in R. I. Rothberg and T. K. Rabb (eds.), *Climate and History: Studies in Interdisciplinary History* (Princeton, 1981); M. L. Parry, *Climatic Change, Agriculture and Settlement* (Folkestone, 1978); W. Dickinson, 'Recurrence Surfaces in Rusland Moss, Cumbria', *Journal of Ecology* 63 (1975), pp. 913–35; K. E. Barber, *Peat Stratigraphy and Climate Change: A Palaeoecological Test of the Theory of Cyclic Peat Bog Regeneration* (Cambridge, 1981); K. E. Barber, F. M. Chambers, D. Maddy, R. Stoneman and J. Brew, 'A Sensitive High-Resolution Record of Late Holocene Climatic Change from a Raised Bog in Northern England', *The Holocene* 4 (1994), pp. 198–205; N. P. Branch and R. G. Scaife, 'The Stratigraphy and Pollen Analysis of Peat Sequences Associated with the Lindlow III Bog Body', in R. C. Turner and R. G. Scaife (eds.), *Bog Bodies: New Discoveries and New Perspectives* (London, 1995), pp. 19–30; A. Leeman and F. Niessen, 'Holocene Glacial Activity and Climatic Variations in the Swiss Alps: Reconstructing a Continuous Record from Proglacial Lake Sediments', *The Holocene* 4 (1994), pp. 259–68; M. Stuiver, P. M. Grootes, and T. F. Braziunas, 'The GISP2δ18 Climate Record of the Past 16,500 Years and the Role of the Sun, Ocean and Volcanoes', *Quaternary Research* 44 (1995), pp. 341–54.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, *End of Roman Britain*, p. 194; Dark, *Environment of Britain*, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Dark, *Environment of Britain*, p. 27.

Such changes may have contributed to social and economic developments in a range of ways. Wetter conditions would have increased problems of waterlogging on heavy soils, and of leaching of nutrients on well-drained ones, while a damper and colder climate would have reduced the potential for arable land use in the north and west, all with potential effects on population levels. To quote Jones again, 'sooner or later . . . a numerous and harvest-sensitive population, afflicted with declining agricultural production from a fully exploited landscape exposed to climate deterioration, must have faced severe demographic crisis'.<sup>12</sup> Climatic deterioration may also have encouraged raiding by the Picts and Scots – Gildas memorably described their armies at one point as being 'like greedy wolves, rabid with extreme hunger'<sup>13</sup> – as well, perhaps, as the emigration of communities living on the coasts of North Germany and Denmark, where land was increasingly subject to marine inundation.

The subsequent amelioration of the climate in later Saxon times would also have had an impact: in Dark's words, 'during the middle-late Anglo-Saxon period there seems to have been a trend towards an increasingly warm and dry climate, which lasted well into the medieval period'.<sup>14</sup> While technological changes may have contributed to the re-expansion of cereal growing in the more problematic environments during the middle and later Saxon periods, this return of warmer and drier conditions – in the ninth century, and especially in the eleventh and twelfth – was probably a more important factor. All these long-term climatic changes, however, while unquestionably important for the overall development of the landscape and environment, did not much alter the essential patterns of regional variation in climate with which we are here concerned, although phases of climatic deterioration in particular may in some ways have served to intensify them.

Patterns of land use, and especially the suitability of particular areas for arable husbandry, were not only a function of climate. Soils were also of crucial importance, and also need to be briefly discussed. The particular characteristics of soils result from the complex interplay of geological raw materials, climate and topography, and can exhibit considerable variation even within quite limited areas, in terms of fertility, moisture content and length of growing season, as well as in trafficability and workability. The limitations which these imposed on farmers were not of course absolute, at least in the early-medieval period. A number of strategies were adopted to maintain or enhance fertility and to improve drainage, while the developments in plough technology in the course of the Anglo-Saxon period, already briefly outlined, allowed heavier soils to be brought into cultivation, and land in general to be cultivated more quickly and efficiently and over longer periods of time. Not only do such factors need to be taken into account when examining the relationship of the early-medieval landscape to the soil types mapped and

<sup>12</sup> Jones, *End of Roman Britain*, p. 279.

<sup>13</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, ed. Winterbottom, p. 21 (chapter 16 in original manuscript).

<sup>14</sup> Dark, *Environment of Britain*, p. 171.

classified in modern surveys; in addition, we need to note that farming has itself in some cases changed soil character. The silty material called *loess* deposited in many districts by high winds during the glaciations gives rise to particularly fertile soils but where these deposits were shallow they have now been entirely eroded by centuries of arable use; erosion has progressively impoverished the soils on chalk slopes, replacing fertile brown earths with thin *rendzinas*; and many of the more problematic clay soils, especially in the Midlands, initially carried a layer of humic brown earth (derived from the decomposition of leaf litter) which has since been lost through centuries of cultivation. Modern classifications prepared by soil scientists, useful though they unquestionably are to landscape historians and others, thus need to be treated with a measure of caution when examining early-medieval settlement and agriculture.

The Soil Survey of Great Britain classifies and maps soils at two distinct levels: those of *series*, and *associations*.<sup>15</sup> The former is a soil which exhibits defined characteristics in terms of mineral content and structure; the latter is the term given to a group of such soils which regularly occur together. Each association usually bears the name of the dominant series within it. Soils can vary greatly over very short distances, as any readers who have been involved in field-walking surveys will be able to testify, and relatively few parts of the country have been mapped by the Soil Survey at the level of *series*, most published maps featuring *associations* only. Nevertheless, and bearing in mind the reservations expressed in the previous paragraph, the maps produced by the Soil Survey provide one of the most powerful guides that we have to understanding the medieval landscape, and even today the boundaries of a particular association usually correspond to significant changes in settlement and field patterns. The complexity of soil character, even mapped at association level, is impossible to reproduce at a national scale, especially in black and white: Figure 3, a complex enough diagram, represents a considerable simplification.

Soils vary greatly but their main characteristics, as these affected the practice of early agriculture, can be summarised briefly. Light, freely draining soils, formed in chalk, limestone and to a lesser extent in sands and gravels, appear to have constituted the core areas of arable cultivation in early Anglo-Saxon times, presumably because they could be cultivated with relative ease even with the simple forms of plough which were then available, at a time when heavier ground was probably increasingly subject to seasonal waterlogging. Chalk soils, and to a lesser extent those formed in lowland limestones, are calcareous and moderately fertile, except on the higher ground, where they are often thin, and where crops are also more exposed to the elements. Here extensive areas of unploughed downland survived into the high Middle Ages, and often to this day, sometimes displaying the archaeological traces of cultivation in prehistoric and Roman times. Soils formed in sands and gravels,

<sup>15</sup> B. W. Avery, *Soil Classification for England and Wales (Higher Categories)* (Harpenden, 1980); B. Clayden and J. M. Hollis, *Criteria for Differentiating Soil Series* (Harpendon, 1984).

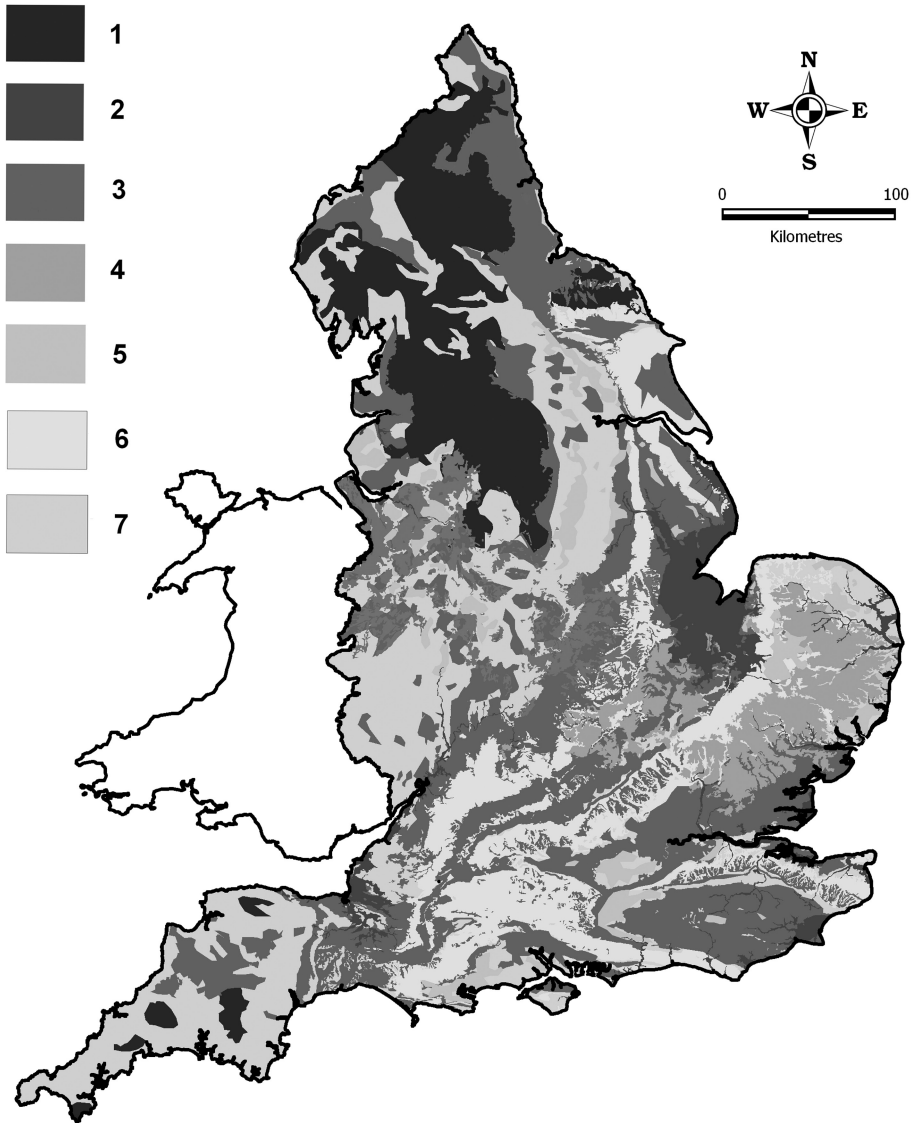


Figure 3. Simplified soil map of England.

1. Upland soils – mainly acid peats and rankers.
2. Wetland soils, formed in lowland peat, estuarine clay and alluvium.
3. Poorly draining and/or acidic clay soils.
4. Soils formed in eastern boulder

clays (following the distinction made by D. Mackney and A. J. Thomasson, *Types of Soil Water Regime*).

5. Soils formed in acid sands.
6. Calcareous soils overlying chalk and limestone.
7. Other moderately well-drained soils.



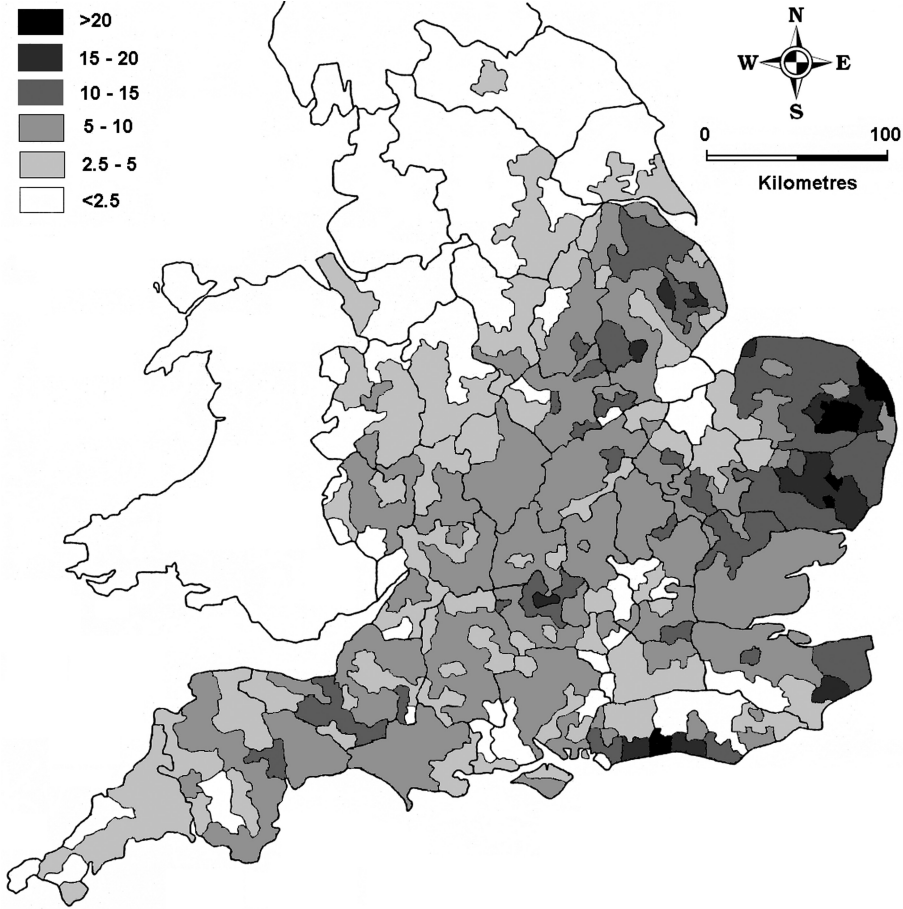
such as those of the Newport or Worlington Associations, tend in contrast to be acidic, because lime is constantly washed out by precipitation, through the highly porous subsoil. They thus produce fairly low yields unless limed in some way, a practice certainly undertaken by the thirteenth century in districts where a calcareous subsoil could be reached, extracted and spread on the surface. In some cases, in the soils known as *podzols*, a hard 'pan' can form where iron and other minerals have been deposited at shallow depth, which in certain circumstances can – paradoxically – impede drainage. Where the sands were particularly deep, or the gravels particularly compacted and affected by a high water table, much of the land remained uncultivated in early-medieval times, some comprising open heathland which had been cleared of tree cover in prehistory, some carrying woodland which, in most cases, had degenerated to open heath by the thirteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

Broadly speaking, while areas of chalk and limestone appear to have formed some of the most densely settled districts in early Saxon times, in relative terms their importance declined thereafter and by the time of Domesday they carried only moderately high population densities, generally between five and ten recorded individuals per square mile but occasionally as many as fifteen, although where there were extensive tracts of high chalk between valleys, as for example on Salisbury Plain, the average tended to be lower (Figure 4). The absence of water on this porous formation ensured that it was difficult to establish settlements away from springlines or watercourses. Areas of sandy soil, in contrast, generally carried low population densities at the time of Domesday, usually less than five recorded individuals per square mile. Once again, this was a decline in relative terms: although never as densely populated as the chalklands, these easily cultivated soils had often formed important areas of early Saxon settlement.

All these freely draining soils were 'hungry', in the parlance of traditional farmers. Nitrogen and the various other elements essential for crop growth, as well as being depleted through cropping, were lost through leaching – washed through the porous subsoil by precipitation. Casual dunging by livestock grazed on the fallows and harvest aftermath was insufficient to counteract this because a high proportion of the nutrients in urine and excrement were soon lost to the atmosphere. By the time documents allow us to see the practice of agriculture clearly, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, farmers maintained fertility by grazing large flocks of sheep on the downs and heaths by day, and folding them by night on the arable fields, when they lay fallow or after harvest.<sup>17</sup> The treading of the sheep ensured that the nitrogen and other elements contained in the urine and dung were thoroughly incorporated into the ploughsoil. It is uncertain how early such practices – which were organised in a variety of ways – developed, but they may well have been an important factor in the

<sup>16</sup> O. Rackham, *History of the Countryside* (London, 1986), pp. 286–02; T. Williamson, *Sutton Hoo and its Landscape: The Contexts of Monuments* (Macclesfield, 2008), pp. 81–5.

<sup>17</sup> E. Kerridge, *The Agricultural Revolution* (London, 1967), pp. 42–5.



**Figure 4.** Recorded Domesday population (1086) (after H. C. Darby, *Domesday England*). There was a clear national trend, with higher recorded population densities in the east of England.

emergence of communal open-field field systems in the later Saxon period (see below, pp. 204–5).

Very different from these easily leached, yet easily cultivated, soils are those formed in clays. Historians often talk about ‘intractable clay soils’ as if they were all much the same but the fact that they carried a wide range of landscapes in the Middle Ages, and still to some extent today, testifies that this is not the case. All clay soils are to a degree poorly draining, gradually accumulating water and becoming saturated during the winter months and then drying slowly through the spring, but to varying extents. Seasonal waterlogging is a problem for farmers because wet soils warm up more slowly than dry ones – they are ‘cold’ land, in the traditional terminology

of farmers – and seed germination, and subsequent plant development, are thus delayed, leading to reduced yields. The most poorly draining soils can become waterlogged to the surface after periods of heavy rain. On sloping ground seeds and seedlings can be washed away while on level terrain anaerobic conditions can develop in standing water, leading to the death of the young plants.<sup>18</sup> But in addition to all this, clay soils – and especially the so-called *pelostagnogleys* and non-calcareous *pelosols* – can become impacted if cultivated when still wet, initially developing a consistency like plasticine, subsequently drying to an impenetrable brick-like mass.<sup>19</sup> They are thus not only difficult to work when wet, ploughs and harrows becoming clogged with sticky, tenacious mud. Unseasonal cultivation can also create a rock-hard surface to the soil through which the young crop can struggle to emerge, leading in turn to delays in ploughing, harrowing and seeding.

Once again, from an early date means were found to ameliorate some of these problems. Applications of manure, as well as restoring some of the nutrients lost through cropping, also served to increase the organic component to the soil, making it less prone to compaction and more freely draining. Allowing soil to stand in ridges before harrowing, and thus to be broken down by frost action, also improves tractability. In addition, from an early date drainage was improved by the cutting of deep ditches around enclosed fields and by ploughing the land into broad ridges – ‘ridge and furrow’ – archaeological evidence for which has been recorded in a pre-Conquest context at Hen Domen in Herefordshire.<sup>20</sup>

As already emphasised, not all clay soils are the same. In general terms, a distinction can be made between those formed in Quaternary drift – principally the boulder clays – and those developed in the Jurassic and Cretaceous clays of the Midlands and the Weald, and in the London clays of Tertiary date in south-east England. The boulder clays, especially in the east, tend to be more mixed with sands and gravels, and are often sandy to their upper horizons. They are less susceptible to waterlogging and in particular to puddling and compaction than soils formed in the older clays, for these are often clayey to the surface, with few inclusions, making them particularly impermeable and difficult to work when wet.<sup>21</sup> Those of the Denchworth and Oxpasture Associations, formed in the Lias clays of the Midlands, are especially problematic in this respect. Some of these heavy clays give rise to soils which are both seasonally waterlogged *and* acidic, such as the Windsor Association, formed in the London clay. But some clays, it should also be noted, are associated with soils which display intermediate characteristics. Those associated with the clay-with-flints, a Quaternary formation which caps

<sup>18</sup> D. H. Robinson, *Fream's Elements of Agriculture* (London, 1949), pp. 36–7.

<sup>19</sup> C. A. H. Hodge, R. G. O. Burton, W. M. Corbett, R. Evans and R. S. Searle, *Soils and their Use in Eastern England* (Harpenden, 1984), pp. 73, 155–8, 186–92, 209–12, 285–8, 295, 351–4; J. Seymour, *The Complete Book of Self-Sufficiency* (London, 1975), p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> P. Barker and J. Lawson, ‘A Pre-Norman Field System at Hen Domen, Montgomery’, *Medieval Archaeology* 15 (1971), pp. 58–72.

<sup>21</sup> Soils Survey of England and Wales, *Map of Winter Rain Acceptance Potential* (Southampton, 1977).

the chalk over wide areas of southern England – principally the Hornbeam and Batcombe Associations – are moderately permeable and yet generally acidic in character, owing to the nature of their principal parent materials. All these variations are further modified by topography. For obvious reasons, where clay soils occupy level plateaux, or broad level plains, their drainage potential, natural or assisted by man, is less than where they lie on sloping ground. Soils formed in clays, in short, display a wide range of variation.

Soils formed in sands, chalk and clays make up the majority of the land area of England, but a number of other types need to be briefly mentioned. In upland areas, where levels of precipitation are high and the rocks often hard and resistant to erosion, the soils are relatively thin, infertile and acidic – the rain having washed out not only the nutrients but also the lime. These factors, combined with a relatively short growing season (especially in more northerly districts) ensured that in the early Middle Ages – and often still today – only limited areas, on the lower ground, were in cultivation. Extensive tracts of the intervening uplands were occupied by moorland, some (generally at lower elevations or towards the eastern side of England) overlying brown earths or podzols and with a vegetation dominated by ling (*Calluna vulgaris*), bell heather (*Erica cinerea*) and cross-leaved heather (*Erica tetralix*), but much (on higher and wetter ground) formed over deep layers of peat, and with vegetation characterised by cotton grass and purple moor-grass.<sup>22</sup>

In lowland districts, a further two out of many soils types deserve to be noted. Areas of waterlogged, low-lying peat were generally used only for grazing in medieval times, or as rough fen meadows and a source of thatching materials. Many areas of silt marsh, in contrast, on the coast or just inland from it, were progressively embanked, drained and converted from salt marsh to fresh grazing, or even arable, in the course of the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries, both in the west of England (the Glastonbury Levels) and in the east (the silt Fens or 'Marshland'; the Norfolk Broads; and Romney Marsh in Kent). Once the salt had been washed out of the soil, this was fertile land, although maintaining the drainage dykes and embankments against inundation was expensive work which demanded high levels of investment, cooperation and organisation.<sup>23</sup> Lastly, scattered across England, but especially in the east, are pockets of *loess* – the fine, silty material deposited by high winds in periglacial conditions – giving rise to soils, such as those of the Wick Associations, which are very fertile, well-drained and easily worked.<sup>24</sup> Areas where such deposits were deepest, and most continuous, correspond with some of the highest densities of population recorded in Domesday Book, as in eastern Norfolk.

Soils had an important influence on the organisation of agriculture, and thus on the character of fields and patterns of settlement, in the early Middle

<sup>22</sup> Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, pp. 305–6.

<sup>23</sup> R. Silvester, 'Medieval Reclamation of Marsh and Fen', in H. Cook and T. Williamson (eds.), *Water Management in the English Landscape: Field, Marsh and Meadow* (Edinburgh, 1999), pp. 122–40.

<sup>24</sup> Hodge *et al.*, *Soils and their Use*, pp. 346–51.

Ages. But they did not 'determine' landscape, in any simple and direct way, and past societies were not merely passive respondents to environmental circumstances, but actively sought to change them, through drainage, marling, and other improvements. More importantly, the influence of soils – not just on landscape, but also on such things as population densities – cannot be understood in isolation from the climatic factors which both contributed to and to some extent overrode their particular characteristics. This was especially true of those formed in clays, which covered large areas of lowland England.

As already noted, clay soils were, to judge from the available evidence, not much cultivated in early Saxon times, and areas in which the majority of the land was occupied by such soils tended to have relatively low population densities. Their subsequent development – as the climate ameliorated, and as more sophisticated ploughs came into widespread use – varied significantly from district to district. By the time of Domesday some clayland areas were still quite thinly settled, and arable land was largely concentrated in valleys where lighter soils, formed in underlying formations, were found. The clay-with-flints on the Chiltern dip slope and the Wealden clays thus generally had less than five and in some areas less than three recorded individuals per square mile, although the London clays could boast rather higher densities, perhaps a consequence of proximity to London. It is the boulder-clay soils, because they were distributed widely across England, which are of particular interest in this context, for they displayed considerable variations in the densities of population and ploughteams recorded by Domesday, variations which appear to have been largely related to levels of precipitation. In the west, in Cheshire and Shropshire, boulder-clay soils seldom carried above five recorded individuals per square mile; but in the Midlands the figure was generally between five and fifteen and in eastern regions – in Norfolk, Suffolk, north Essex and eastern Hertfordshire – there were usually above ten and in some places over twenty recorded individuals, amongst the highest population densities in England. The particular character of the boulder clays (and thus of the soils developed within them) found in these different regions was certainly a factor in this pattern of variation. But climate was a more important influence. Higher levels of precipitation ensured that boulder-clay soils in the west tended to be more acidic in character, and thus intrinsically less fertile, than those in the east. More importantly, climatic variation had a very direct impact on their exploitation, in terms of seasonal waterlogging, the timing of spring cultivations and thus the length of the growing season.

The variations exhibited by boulder-clay soils in this respect are part of a wider and more significant pattern. While at a detailed level Domesday population densities were related to patterns of soils and geology, overall they exhibited (as already intimated) a rather different and more straightforward trend, one clearly related to aspects of climate, with the highest recorded densities in the drier east of the country, and the lowest in the wetter west and south (Figure 4). Yet at the same time the influence of climate was modified in innumerable and complex ways by local and regional soil characteristics,



so that the pattern of demographic variations in Figure 4 cannot be derived directly from the national rainfall patterns shown in Figure 2. Their close relationship with the suitability of particular areas for arable production becomes clear, however, when we compare them with the distribution of arable land in England as recorded by the Land Utilisation Survey in the 1940s (Figure 5). This is a particularly useful *comparandum* owing to the specific circumstances structuring national land-use patterns at this time. By the later nineteenth century the completion of the enclosure of open fields and commons, the widespread adoption of improvements like marling and under-drainage, and the continued elaboration of the transport infrastructure, had ensured that arable land use was generally concentrated in those parts of the country best suited by nature to the cultivation of cereals. Over the next half century, moreover, leading up to the 1930s, a deep agricultural depression led to the retreat of cultivation from all but the most suitable environments, enhancing and intensifying this pattern.<sup>25</sup>

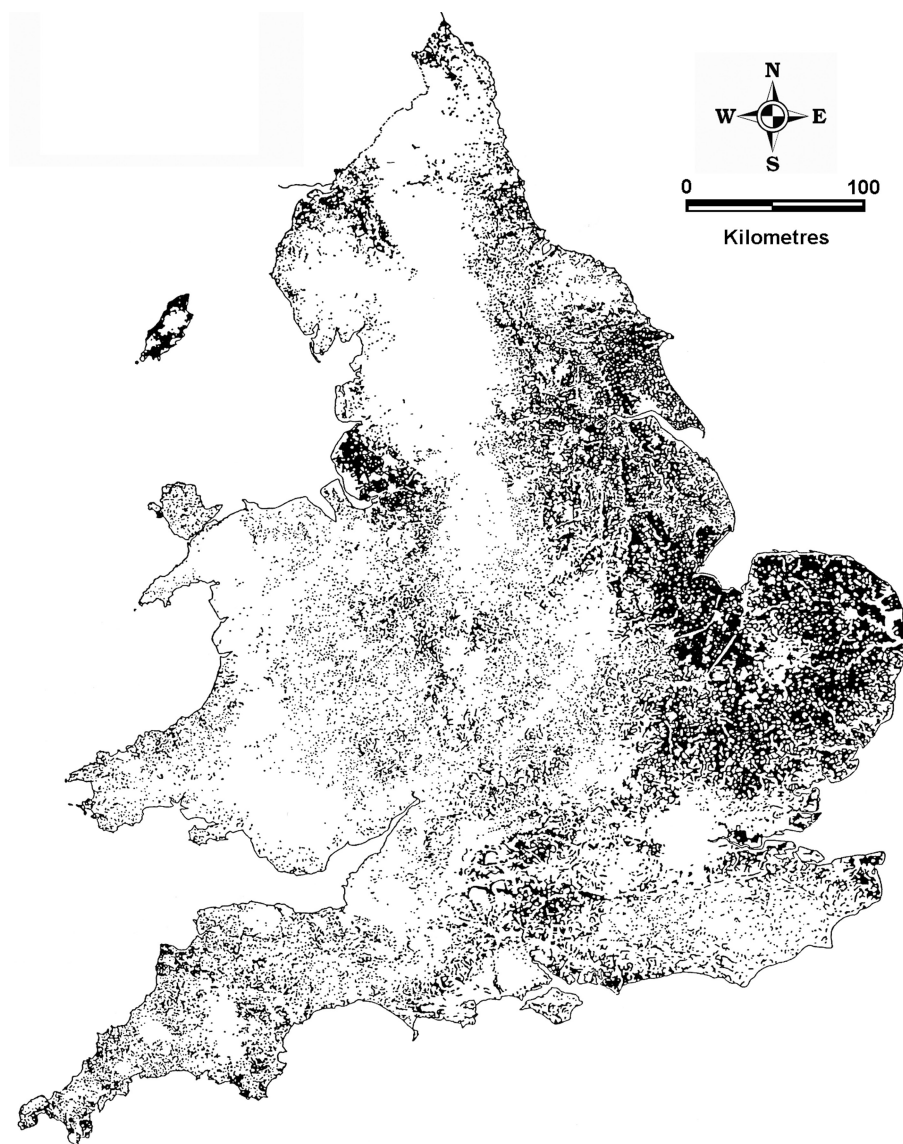
The CERES model for predicting wheat growth, originally developed in the 1970s by the USDA-Agricultural Research Service to assess foreign and home levels of production, has been elaborated and developed by agronomists over the subsequent decades. It takes into account soil character, rainfall, temperature and other climatic factors, and has been employed by some agricultural historians of the modern period to model past levels of output and their determinants.<sup>26</sup> Although temperature has an important bearing on yields, rainfall 'is by far the most important climatic factor determining the wheat yield in Western Europe'.<sup>27</sup> This is because 'the grain yield is susceptible to rainfall fluctuations *throughout* the growth cycle': when the wheat plant is developing; in early summer, when the grains are 'filling'; and in late summer, when the grains are harvested. In short, wheat and barley produce the heaviest yields in areas of modest rainfall, especially in spring to late summer. But not only are heavier yields obtained in drier districts; more importantly in the present context, the harvest is less likely to be ruined by high levels of late-summer precipitation. It is easy to see how the environmental circumstances which in modern times – in the context of an integrated national economy – ensured a concentration of cereal farming in the east of England would, in the early-medieval period, have encouraged relatively high population densities in these same districts, where demographic growth was less likely to be checked by periodic harvest failure and dearth.

<sup>25</sup> L. Dudley Stamp, *The Land of Britain: Its Use and Misuse* (London, 1950), pp. 61–4, 83–107; J. Brown, *Agriculture in England: A Survey of Farming, 1870–1947* (Manchester, 1987); P. J. Perry, *British Farming in the Great Depression: An Historical Geography* (Newton Abbot, 1974); T. Williamson, *The Transformation of Rural England: Farming and the Landscape 1700–1870* (Exeter, 2002), pp. 155–78.

<sup>26</sup> J. T. Ritchie, 'Validation of the CERES Wheat Model in Diverse Environments', in W. Day and R. H. Atkins (eds.), *Wheat Growth and Modelling* (Bristol, 1984); L. Brunt, *Nature or Nurture? Explaining English Wheat Yields in the Agricultural Revolution* (Oxford, 1997).

<sup>27</sup> Brunt, *Nature or Nurture*, p. 7.





**Figure 5.** The distribution of arable land use in Britain in c.1940 (after L. Dudley Stamp, *The Land of Britain*).

*River and wold*

Single soil types, even at the association level, are seldom continuous and uninterrupted over extensive tracts of ground. Instead, within any district or locality soils tend to vary with topography, and in particular to display a contrast between those found on valley sides – which are often well-drained, at least moderately fertile and suitable for use as arable land – and those of the intervening uplands, which are often formed in poorly draining clays or acid drift, or are thinner and less fertile, and more exposed to the elements, than those of the lowlands. Most of the significant settlements in late prehistoric, Roman and early Saxon times were thus located in major valleys (often on well-drained gravel terraces) where there was also usually a good supply of water, with the main areas of arable land beside them. The higher interfluvies, in contrast, were occupied by tracts of woodland and pasture: they were spatially as well as agriculturally marginal.

This broad distinction, between what he termed ‘river’ and ‘wold’, was developed by the local and regional historian Alan Everitt into a general model for understanding the development of early settlement in England. It was used and further elaborated by other members of the ‘Leicester School’, most notably Harold Fox and Charles Phythian Adams.<sup>28</sup> According to this model the upland wolds were initially exploited – as a source of grazing, pannage, wood and timber – by settlements which were often occupied on a temporary or seasonal basis. Fox in particular emphasised the importance of trees and bushes as a source of sustenance for livestock. We tend to think of sheep as animals that live off grass but they will happily consume woodland vegetation, being particularly partial to ash, ivy and holly. Cattle will likewise browse off whatever foliage they can reach, and as late as the sixteenth century Thomas Tusser advised the cutting of branches from trees to provide feed in winter months.<sup>29</sup> But in the denser stands of woodland pigs would be pastured, especially on the acorns, beech mast and nuts in autumn. As population rose in the course of the Anglo-Saxon period these woodland pastures were gradually opened up for cultivation, and settlements within them became permanent, and proliferated. However, such places continued to be dependent upon or tenurially subservient to the primary settlements in the principal valleys, and generally remained smaller in size.

Everitt’s model, as well as being a useful way of conceptualising the development of local and regional landscapes and economies, can also help in our understanding of past social and territorial history. As Phythian Adams has emphasised, because the upland wolds between the valleys were areas of graz-

<sup>28</sup> A. Everitt, ‘River and Wold: Reflections on the Historical Origins of Regions and Pays’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 3 (1977), pp. 1–19; H. S. A. Fox, ‘The People of the Wolds’, in M. Aston, D. Austin and C. Dyer (eds.), *The Rural Settlements of Medieval England: Studies Presented to Maurice Beresford and John Hurst* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 77–104; C. Phythian Adams, *Re-thinking English Local History* (Leicester, 1987).

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Tusser, *The Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*, ed. G. Grigson (Oxford, 1984), p. 74.

ing and woodland, and at best only sparsely settled, they tended to constitute cut-off points in patterns of human interaction – to form, that is, the margins of social territories. Communities were focused on particular valleys, or valley systems, developing identities distinct from those dwelling the other side of a watershed. Even when the interfluves came to be more intensively exploited established patterns of social interaction tended to continue, not least because some of the valley settlements evolved into market centres, with important roles as the social and economic foci for wider communities. Over time, in other words, social territories tended to approximate to drainage basins.

It is thus unsurprising that, to take but one example, the boundaries of hundreds or wapentakes tend to follow, in many cases, the watersheds between major valleys (more so than those of shires, which often appear more arbitrary in character). Although these units were imposed on the landscape by late Saxon administrators they appear to have developed from one or more ancient, 'organic' territories (see below, pp. 82–8). Of course, like all conceptual models, 'river and wold' should not be pressed too far. Other aspects of the natural topography also structured the configuration of territories in the past. In particular, where rivers widened in their lower reaches and could not easily be crossed, and especially where they became tidal, they often served as barriers to regular intercourse and thus developed as significant territorial boundaries. The Thames estuary thus represented a division in Saxon times between the kingdom of Kent and the East Saxons; and hundred boundaries, having followed for some distance major watersheds between two rivers, will often leave the high ground to run along one or the other, as these approach the sea.

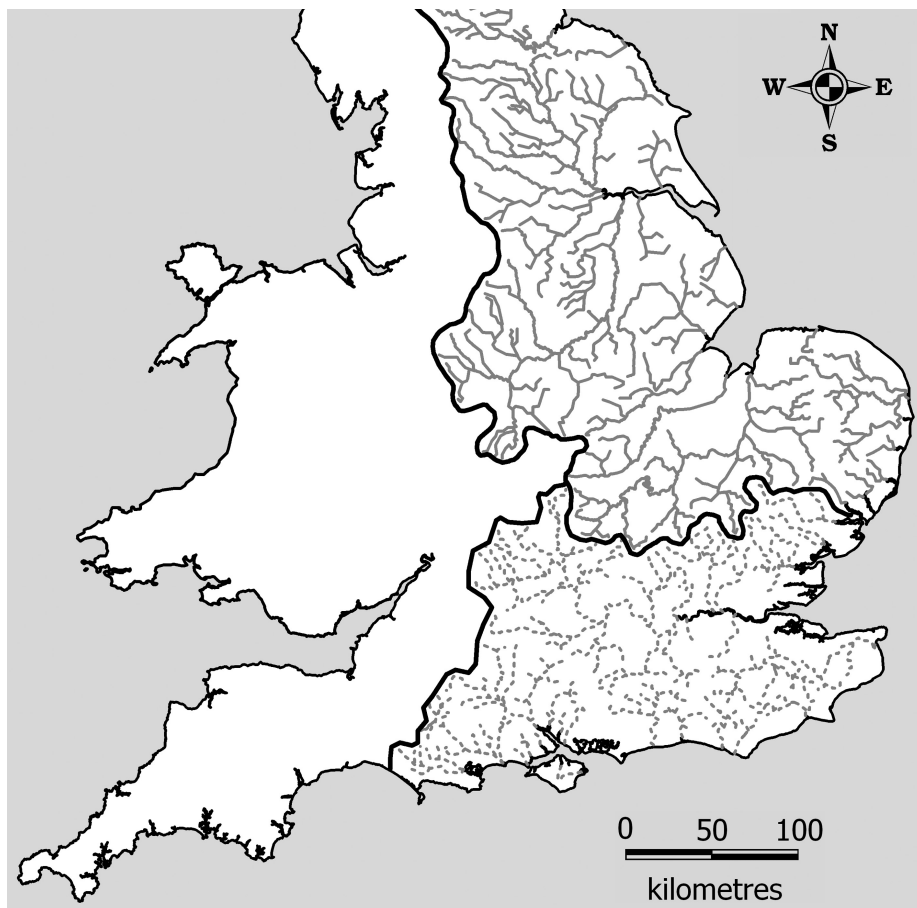
The 'river and wold' model provides a powerful tool for understanding the development of both environments and societies at a local and regional level. But to some extent – and in some historical periods – it can also be employed to explain patterning in the archaeological and historical data at a broader, national level. Extensive drainage basins, defined by major watersheds, appear to have constituted cultural provinces, within which communities shared particular beliefs and fashions over large tracts of territory. That is, patterns of cultural and social identity at a national as much as a local level were structured and moulded by the natural topography. River systems formed the arteries along which ideas and styles were transmitted, exchanged from group to group and person to person, while rivers themselves were, in their navigable lower reaches at least, important physical paths of movement, for it was generally easier to transport men and materials by river than over land.

Crucial for understanding the character of drainage basins, and thus social territories, is the fact that the configuration of major rivers and their tributaries (and of the watersheds between them) cannot be derived in any simple or direct way from the structures of geology briefly outlined at the start of this chapter. This is especially true in the scarp-and-vale countryside of the Midlands, where major rivers often cut in a seemingly perverse fashion through significant ranges of hills, as the Thames does through the Corallian

limestone ridge near Oxford or – more dramatically – through the Chilterns at Goring. The reason is that the rivers in question originally followed the direction of slope as this was when the successive clay and limestone strata were first uplifted, at a time when what are now clay vales stood as high as the ridges between them. In the old-fashioned parlance of physical geography, they were ‘consequent’ streams. However, the clays were eroded more rapidly than the limestones, cut into by ‘subsequent’ tributaries. The clay vales were created, but the course of the main river was already long established by this time, and thus continued to cut directly through what were now ranges of hills formed by the more resistant strata.<sup>30</sup> These, and other complications of geomorphology, mean that watersheds between river systems do not always follow the highest ground, represented by a particular geological formation, in any area. This in turn ensures that the patterns of movement and contact channelled by river systems sometimes connect what appear, at first sight, to be geographically disparate areas. This explains why, for example, the early Anglo-Saxon archaeology of the Oxford region has more in common with that of Kent, to which it was connected by the Thames, than with that of the areas lying immediately to the east, even though these might appear to share a similar topographic position to the north of the great chalk escarpment formed by the Chilterns and the Berkshire Downs.

This particular example is one manifestation of a much broader division of England into three great drainage provinces, whose waters make their way into the North Sea, the Irish Sea and the Channel and the Thames estuary respectively (Figure 6). These major topographic divisions are not evident in all, or even in most, phases of history and prehistory. They seem to be a particular feature of periods when population levels were low, and systems of political organisation were simple and small-scale, and in which England was subject to a significant extent to influences, and immigration, from overseas: especially, that is, in the fifth and sixth centuries. The watersheds defining these provincial boundaries are, as already intimated, not necessarily the highest ground in any district. Sometimes they correspond with dramatic ranges of hills, obvious barriers to contact and communication, but sometimes they follow more muted topographic features. The boundary between the North Sea Province and the Channel Province, for example, is defined all the way from Tring in Hertfordshire to Newmarket in Suffolk by the impressive chalk escarpment of the Chiltern Hills and their more diminutive extension, the ‘East Anglian Heights’. But to the west the line dividing the two provinces is less physically imposing. Leaving the Chiltern escarpment it tracks north through the south Midlands and follows the watershed dividing rivers (such as the Thame) draining westwards into the Thames from those flowing eastwards into the Great Ouse, along only moderately high ground (although, significantly, its course follows a string of places with ‘woodland’ names – Wingrave, Stewkley, Mursley, Horwood,

<sup>30</sup> B. W. Sparks, *Geomorphology* (London, 1950), pp. 101–4; Trueman, *Geology and Scenery*, pp. 29–31, 56–8.



**Figure 6.** The three drainage 'Provinces' of England.

Whaddon Chase). To the east of Newmarket the boundary is even more diffuse, picking its way through the boulder-clay uplands of west Suffolk, passing to the south of Bury St Edmunds, but then turning northwards and following, to the south-east, the low plateau lying just to the north of the River Gipping. To some extent the scale of the topographic features marking the watershed determined how 'permeable' it might be, in social and cultural terms. However, even very minor watersheds, in certain periods, appear to have formed important social barriers.

As discussed in Chapter 3, these major provinces, while clearly apparent in the early Saxon period, seem to lessen in importance as more coherent and hierarchical political units developed in middle Saxon times. The boundaries of the early kingdoms, while sometimes respecting major topographic features, just as frequently ignore and override them, their configuration reflecting the random fortunes of conquest and alliance. The provinces do,



however, re-emerge as a major influence on settlement in the Viking age, and some sections of their boundaries seem to have been significant over longer periods of time. The stretch of the boundary between the North Sea Province and the Channel Province running through East Anglia, for example – diagonally across Suffolk from north-west to south-east – seems to mark the division between the Iceni and the Trinovantes in the later Iron Age and the cut-off in a number of post-medieval cultural distributions – even that of the roofing tiles called pantiles, which were only introduced into England in the late seventeenth century – as well as constituting a crucial break in archaeological distributions in the early and middle Saxon periods.<sup>31</sup> The way in which hillforts seem to follow close to this same provincial boundary on its course through the south Midlands suggests that this section marked a liminal zone in the Iron Age. And in a much earlier period, it may not be entirely coincidental that both Stonehenge and Avebury lie within 10 kilometres of the watershed dividing the Western and Channel Provinces, while the complex of monuments at Rollright lies more or less precisely on it.

### Conclusion

Some recent research on the medieval landscape has involved a quest for long-term cultural regions, unrelated to environmental factors, which can explain a range of patterns in the archaeological data, and such things as the distributions of particular types of vernacular buildings, field systems and settlement forms.<sup>32</sup> In marked contrast to such an approach, the overt and primary purpose of this chapter has been to present a range of identifiable geographical factors which might have influenced the development of medieval settlement and landscape. The *implied* argument, as many will have realised, is that we need to think about a number of different kinds of geographical influence, each of which – while affecting many facets of social and economic life – primarily impacted upon a smaller number. Climate demonstrably affected the viability of arable farming, and was thus the major determinant of population densities. It may also, as we shall see, have had an important influence on aspects of social organisation. Soils were also a significant factor in these matters, but they were particularly implicated in spatial variations in the practice of farming, and thus crucially influenced the development of settlement patterns and field system, although geology – through its impact on water supply, a subject explored in some detail in Chapter 9 – also had a direct impact on these. Topography, in contrast – especially the configuration of river and wold – was more important in

<sup>31</sup> E. Martin, 'Suffolk in the Iron Age', in J. Davies and T. Williamson (eds.), *Land of the Iceni: The Iron Age in Northern East Anglia* (Norwich, 1999), pp. 45–100, 82–93; T. Williamson, *England's Landscape: East Anglia* (London, 2006), pp. 28–30; E. Martin and M. Satchell, *Where Most Inclosures Be. East Anglian Fields, History, Morphology and Management*, published as *East Anglian Archaeology* 124 (2008), pp. 214–26.

<sup>32</sup> Rippon, *Beyond the Medieval Village*, especially conclusion, pp. 267–8; Martin and Satchell, *Where Most Enclosures Be*, pp. 214–26.



shaping patterns of contact and communication, and thus cultural regions and local systems of territorial organisation. In spatial terms, these varied kinds of environmental influence had complex relationships, their boundaries sometimes cross-cutting, sometimes coinciding. In the chapters that follow I shall explore some of the ways in which this constellation of geographical complexity appears to have structured and influenced the societies and landscapes of early-medieval England.

### 3

## Culture, Ethnicity and Topography

The term 'settlement' has a useful ambiguity in early-medieval studies, being used not only as a term for the location and morphology of villages, hamlets and farms, the subjects of subsequent chapters, but also to describe the immigration of new peoples – the Anglo-Saxons and the Danes – into England. Major debates surround the character and scale of both of these settlements, as noted in Chapter 1, but as yet little attempt has been made to examine either within a geographical or environmental context. This, in essence, is the purpose of the present chapter.

### *Archaeology and ethnicity*

As discussed briefly in Chapter 1, the precise significance of the new, intrusive material culture of the fifth and sixth centuries – especially the cemeteries featuring cremations or inhumations with grave goods – remains contested, with some archaeologists, most notably Anthony and Harke, arguing that it indicates a fully fledged folk movement,<sup>1</sup> while others insist that it reflects a take-over by a small warrior elite.<sup>2</sup> It is useful to set this diversity of opinion against the more general development of archaeological interpretation over the last half century or so. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries material culture was usually viewed as a direct reflection of ethnicity, and the cemeteries and other intrusive material could thus be interpreted in a relatively straightforward way as reflecting the events recorded in the early historical sources – in Gildas, Bede and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The cemeteries were the signature of Germanic invaders and settlers. The variations which they exhibited in mortuary practices, and in the kinds of artefact interred with the dead (or otherwise recovered, from excavations or as chance finds), were likewise interpreted largely in ethnic terms, as indicating the areas occupied by the principal invasive groups described by Bede. From the early nineteenth century, through to the early twentieth, the archaeological material could thus be seen as an illustration and reflection of the historical record. Indeed, the extent to which changing distributions of artefacts and cemeteries could be interpreted in terms of the political and military events described by the

<sup>1</sup> Adams, 'Invasion, Diffusion, Evolution?'; Van Gerven and Levy, 'The Retreat from Migrationism'; Crawford, 'Britons, Anglo-Saxons and the Germanic Burial Ritual'; Hamerow, 'Migration Theory and the Anglo-Saxon "Identity Crisis"'; Hodges, *Anglo-Saxon Achievement*.

<sup>2</sup> Harke, 'Anthropologists and Migrations'; Harke, 'Kings and Warriors'.

historical sources seems remarkable to modern eyes. Leeds, for example, published in 1912 a paper entitled 'The Distribution of the Anglo-Saxon Saucer Brooch in Relation to the Battle of Bedford, AD 571'.<sup>3</sup>

Even in the second half of the twentieth century scholars commonly interpreted their material essentially in terms of military and political, as well as social and economic, history. Sonia Chadwick Hawkes in 1974 thus saw archaeologists, historians and place-name scholars as engaged in a joint enquiry, aimed at 'a further understanding of the direction and character of the Germanic people's landtakings, the nature and development of their settlements and economy, and their relations with surviving late Roman institutions and peoples'.<sup>4</sup> But in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s archaeologists like Hawkes herself, J. N. L. Myres and Vera Evison, rather than simply seeing the archaeological material as a reflection, however imperfect, of the events recorded by Bede and the *Chronicle*, began to use it to augment and amend the historical record. In particular, all three scholars argued that the cemetery evidence suggested the presence of Germanic mercenaries, *laeti* or *foederati*, in late Roman Britain, German tribesmen settled by the government to serve as defenders against further barbarian attackers. The kind of practice described by Gildas as being followed by the 'proud tyrant', in other words, had originated earlier, and the first Anglo-Saxons had been guests of Roman rather than of sub-Roman authorities. Archaeological material was still often interpreted in terms of narrative history – Myres, for example, in his monumental study of *Anglo-Saxon Pottery and the Settlement of England*, used the changing distributions of cemeteries over time to chart not only the expansion of the Anglo-Saxon domination of lowland England but also a temporary reverse, which he confidently associated with the British counter-attack described by Gildas.<sup>5</sup> But it was now also seen as an independent source of evidence, which suggested not only a new chronology and process for the English settlement, but also added to the list of ethnic groups who were involved in it. Evison for example employed the cemetery evidence from Kent and adjacent counties to argue that as well as coming from the areas described by Bede, the first Germanic settlers in the area south of the Thames included Franks and others dwelling along the northern coast of France and the Low Countries.<sup>6</sup>

Many contemporary archaeologists are rightly suspicious of these approaches, and especially of the general idea that archaeological evidence informs us about the same kinds of issues and processes as the meagre historical narratives. In large part this is because new agendas, involving new approaches to the interpretation of material culture, have developed over the last few decades. Archaeologists in the 1970s and 1980s, fired up by the optimism of the 'New' or processual archaeology, attempted to understand

<sup>3</sup> E. T. Leeds, 'The Distribution of the Anglo-Saxon Saucer Brooch in Relation to the Battle of Bedford, AD 571', *Archaeologia* 63 (1912), pp. 159–202.

<sup>4</sup> S. J. Hawkes, 'Post-Roman and Anglo-Saxon', *Archaeological Journal* 131 (1974), 408–20.

<sup>5</sup> J. N. L. Myres, *Anglo-Saxon Pottery and the Settlement of England* (Oxford, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> V. I. Evison, *The Anglo-Saxon Invasions South of the Thames* (London, 1965).

variations within, and between, cemeteries – in the quantity, and quality, of the grave goods – in terms of social organisation, social stratification and family structure.<sup>7</sup> A subsequent generation of post-processualists showed how difficult this can be, arguing that social organisation cannot be ‘read off’ the material evidence in any simple or direct way. The dead do not bury themselves, and the character of grave goods is the result of choices made by the living, often from very complex motives, although there are still strong advocates of the older approaches, albeit now in more subtle and nuanced forms.<sup>8</sup> Other agendas have also opened up, with grave goods now being interpreted in terms of gender and age or – but only recently – Anglo-Saxon belief systems.<sup>9</sup> One implication of such perspectives is that material culture, accompanying burials or in other contexts, was not simply a badge of ethnicity, and that identities and styles could be consciously chosen by individuals and groups.

All this said, some scholars are still interested in what the archaeological record might mean in terms of ethnic change – what it can tell us about the possible scale and character of the Anglo-Saxon settlement. At one extreme, some archaeologists have gone so far as to argue that the cemeteries, and the distinctive material culture which they contain, have no necessary connection with immigrants: they should be read essentially as a ‘cultural package’, consciously and deliberately adopted by indigenous as much as immigrant communities, as parts of Britain, cut free from political, economic and ideological ties with Gaul and southern Europe, swung into the cultural orbit of the north Germanic and Scandinavian world.<sup>10</sup> At the other, a number of scholars have used DNA taken from a sample of the modern population to argue that there was a significant influx of new people from north Germany and Scandinavia in the fifth and sixth centuries, whose areas of settlement are even today reflected in genetic differences between the people of the east and the west of Britain.<sup>11</sup>

While the extent of ethnic change – the scale of the settlement – thus continues to be of interest to many, archaeologists in general are cautious about seeing simple correlations between ethnicity and material culture. And they

<sup>7</sup> C. J. Arnold, ‘Wealth and Social Structure: A Matter of Life and Death’, in P. Rahtz, T. Dickinson and L. Watts (eds.), *Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries 1979* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 81–41.

<sup>8</sup> J. D. Richards, ‘Funerary Symbolism in Anglo-Saxon England: Further Social Dimensions of Mortuary Practice’, *Scottish Archaeological Review* 3 (1984), pp. 42–55; Arnold, *Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 179. But see also Harke, ‘Early Anglo-Saxon Social Structure’, pp. 149–51.

<sup>9</sup> W. Filmer-Sankey and T. Pestell, *Snappe Anglo-Saxon Cemetery: Excavations and Surveys 1824–1992*, published as *East Anglian Archaeology* 95 (2001), especially pp. 262–4; S. Crawford, ‘Children, Death and the Afterlife in Anglo-Saxon England’, *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 6 (1993), pp. 83–91; S. Lucy, ‘Housewives, Warriors and Slaves? Sex and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Burials’, in J. Moore and E. Scott (eds.), *Invisible People and Processes: Writing Gender and Childhood into European Archaeology* (Leicester, 1997), pp. 150–68.

<sup>10</sup> Hodges, *Anglo-Saxon Achievement*.

<sup>11</sup> Harke, ‘Kings and Warriors’; Harke, ‘Early Anglo-Saxon Social Structure’, pp. 155–7; N. Cook, ‘Viking Genetics Survey Results: The Viking Genes Map’: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/Vikings/vikingsmaP.html>; M. E. Weale, D. A. Weiss, R. F. Jager, W. Bradman and M. Thomas, ‘“Y” Chromosome Evidence for Anglo-Saxon Mass Migration’, *Molecular Biology and Evolution* 19/7 (2002).

have, in particular, grown wary of identifying the distributions of different artefacts or funerary practices with the settlement areas of the 'three very powerful Germanic tribes, the Saxons, the Angles, and the Jutes', mentioned in Bede's account,<sup>12</sup> an approach which, as noted in Chapter 1, began with Roach Smith, Wright and Kemble in the mid-nineteenth century, and which continued to be widely accepted into the twentieth. In fact, some modern archaeologists believe that England was never in fact settled by discrete ethnic groups at all, and that the invaders were of very mixed descent. In Sam Lucy's words:

The immediate post-Roman period in Britain, and indeed in the whole of Europe, was a time when identities were in an extreme state of flux . . . when charismatic leaders could gather strong bands of followers around them and gain control of often extensive tracts of territory.<sup>13</sup>

In the very process of migration people from a wide area of northern Germany and southern Scandinavia might have become incorporated within the same war band. Bede's account, involving the seizure of particular territories by particular peoples, was written long after the events it describes and at a time when, with the emergences of more sophisticated and coherent political units – recognisable if diminutive 'states' – stories of shared ethnic origins were evolving to help bind their often disparate peoples together. Origin myths thus developed throughout north-west Europe in the period between the sixth and the tenth centuries and, as Susan Reynolds has argued, the influence of the Church was also an important factor in this (as it was in the development of the kingdoms themselves). Stories like those told by Bede arose in part from 'the desire of learned clerics both to find honourable origins for their own peoples and to make sense of the contemporary world in the light of classical and Christian learning'.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, important spatial patterns in fifth- and sixth-century material culture remain, and require some explanation. The western limits of the distribution of early cemeteries itself deserves more attention than it is usually given. Indeed, its interpretation has been so neglected that it is somehow, even by archaeologists usually well aware of the limitations of simple 'ethnic' explanations, seen simply as marking the western margin of English conquest before the seventh century, when such funerary practices were abandoned.<sup>15</sup> Few attempts have been made to explain why the English settlement of this western area – which includes many lowland districts, and does not simply comprise the Highland Zone – took so long to accomplish. The historical sources, it should also be noted, are somewhat vague about the

<sup>12</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. McClure and Collins, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> S. Reynolds, 'Medieval *Origines Gentium* and the Community of the Realm', *History* 68 (1983), pp. 375–90, at p. 375.

<sup>15</sup> H. C. Darby, *A New Historical Geography of England Before 1600* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 4–10; Rippon, *Beyond the Medieval Village*, p. 106; B. Cunliffe, *Wessex to AD 1000* (London, 1993), pp. 280–1; N. Higham, *The Origins of Cheshire* (Manchester, 1993), p. 77; M. Todd, *The South West to AD 1000* (London, 1986), pp. 267–9.

final stages of English expansion, especially into the west Midlands and the north-west. They also, rather curiously, suggest that some of these western areas were in fact conquered several decades *before* the start of the Conversion.

Moreover, while it seems unlikely that the settlement areas of Bede's 'three powerful nations' can be detected in the archaeological record, important regional patterns are evident in early Anglo-Saxon material culture. Cremation cemeteries, and especially those large cemeteries in which cremation is the sole or overwhelmingly dominant rite, are thus a particular feature of northern East Anglia, the Midlands, and north-east England, although inhumation was also practised in these regions and became more important with the passing of time. While cremation was practised in the south of the country and in the Thames valley, cremation cemeteries are much rarer here and generally small in size.<sup>16</sup> Several of the artefacts which an earlier generation considered to be indicative of Anglian culture display a distribution remarkably similar to that of the cremation cemeteries, especially the artefacts known as 'wrist clasps' and particular styles of brooch – those classified by archaeologists as 'equal armed', 'cruciform' and 'annular', together with most of the 'square-headed' variety. All tend to be found in northern East Anglia, the Midlands and north-east England. In the Thames valley, and in the south and south-east, in contrast, wrist clasps tend to be rare and different forms of brooch predominate – a particular kind of square-headed (Group VIII), quoit, and radiate-headed.<sup>17</sup> It is of course true that, as more and more material has been recovered through excavations and the activities of metal detectorists, many of the discrete distributions of particular Anglian or Saxon artefact types have blurred, and expanded beyond their allotted territories. Individual artefacts – different kinds of brooch, for example – were evidently considered fashionable over wide areas of Anglo-Saxon England, passing easily between peoples in different parts of the country. But such discoveries have not radically altered the patterns which were first identified in the nineteenth century by scholars like Roach Smith and Leeds, and as Catherine Hills has explained there clearly were regional variations in the style of dress in the fifth and early sixth centuries. 'In East Anglia, the East Midlands and Yorkshire, women wore cruciform and annular brooches, and fastened their sleeves with metal clasps. In southern England, in Sussex, Wessex and Essex, they preferred round brooches and did not use clasps'.<sup>18</sup>

These patterns and distributions, like those displayed by the early cemeteries as a whole, are curious. It is not, for example, immediately obvious why the distribution of 'Anglian' material, and of cremation cemeteries, should cut in such an arbitrary manner across East Anglia, so that Norfolk

<sup>16</sup> C. Hills, 'Early Historic Britain', in J. Hunter and I. Ralston (eds.), *The Archaeology of Britain: An Introduction from the Upper Palaeolithic to the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1998), pp. 176–93, at pp. 183–4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184; M. Parker Pearson, R. van de Noort and A. Woolf, 'Three Men and a Boat: Sutton Hoo and the East Anglian Kingdom', *Anglo-Saxon England* 22 (1993), pp. 27–50, at p. 34–6; J. Hines, *The Scandinavian Character of Anglian England in the Pre-Viking Period* (Oxford, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> Hills, 'Early Historic Britain', p. 184.

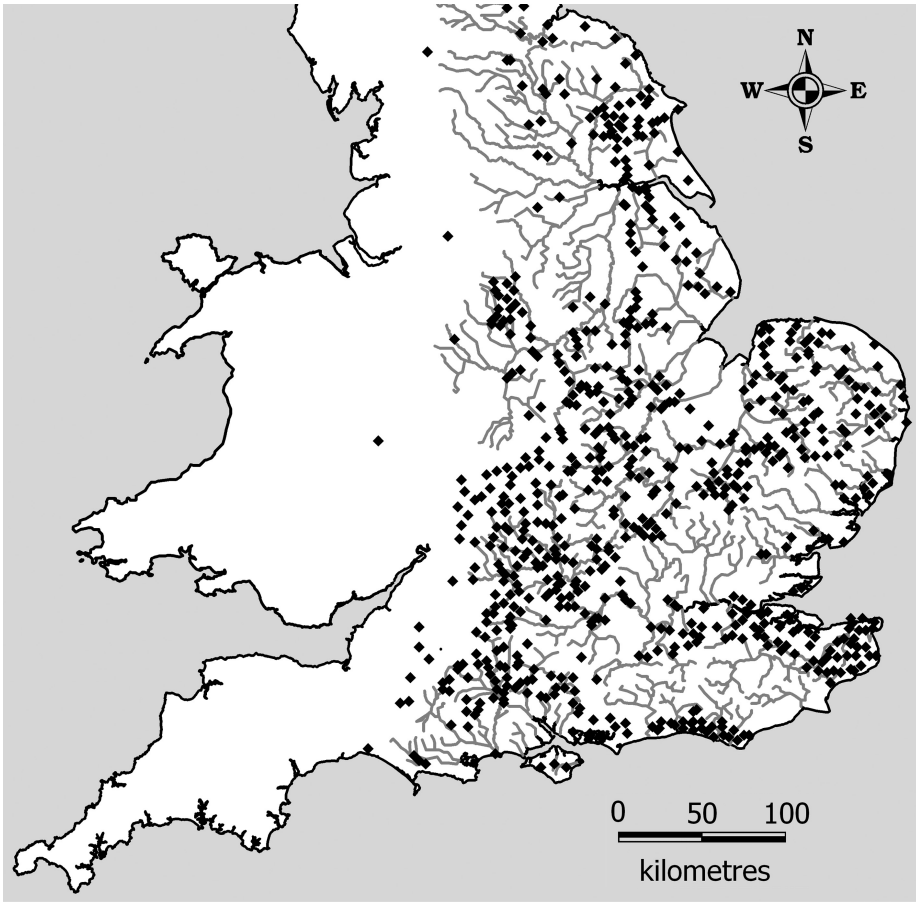


and northern and eastern Suffolk fall neatly within the Anglian area of settlement, while southern and western Suffolk and Essex appear 'Saxon' in their archaeological character. And there is a further patterning in the data worth noting. While inhumation was the dominant rite in the south and in the Thames valley, inhumation cemeteries are not found everywhere here. Whereas in East Anglia, the Midlands and the north-east cemeteries of all kinds – cremation, inhumation or mixed – are widely scattered, and have gaps in their distribution which are usually explicable in terms of obvious environmental factors (areas of high, drift-covered uplands, tracts of heavy, intractable clay or waterlogged fens), this is less true in the south and south-east of England, where extensive districts of fertile and relatively easily worked land, especially in counties like Hertfordshire and Essex, have consistently failed to produce any kinds of 'Anglo-Saxon' burials. In other words, in areas in which inhumation was the normal burial rite in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries some proportion of the population appear to have employed forms of disposal which have left no clear archaeological traces, like many of their predecessors in Roman Britain.

### *Distributions and topography*

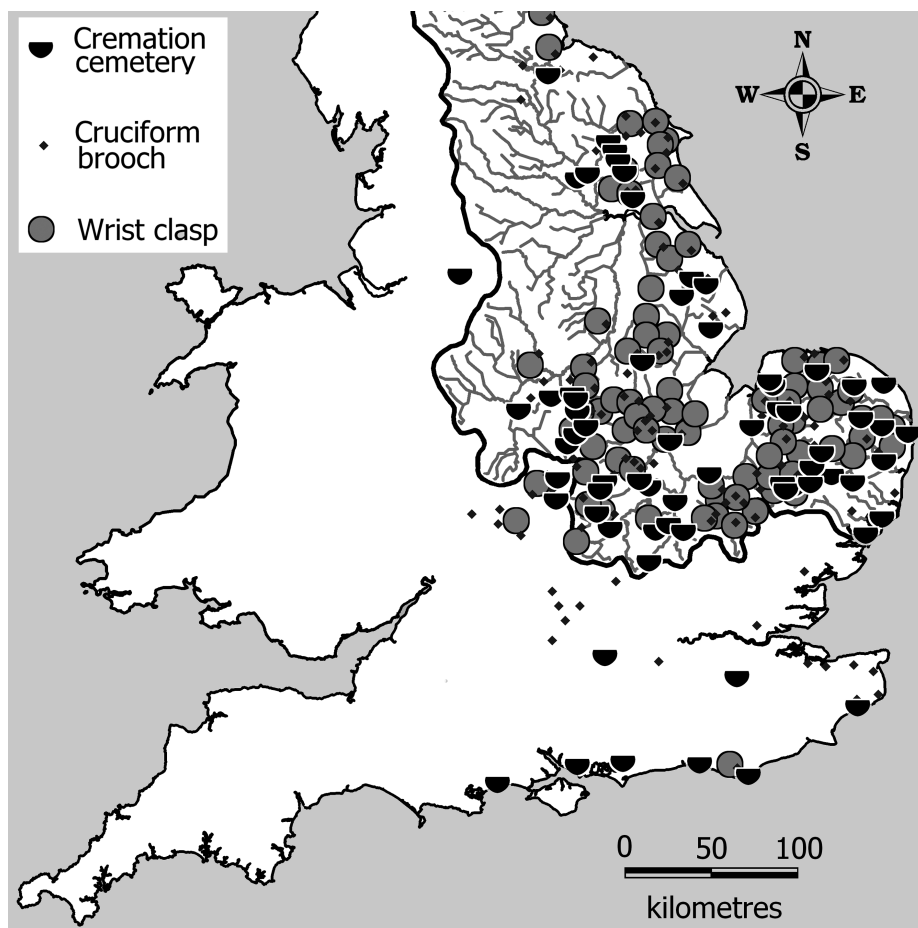
These patterns become easier to understand when we consider them not in isolation, but within the context of physical geography, and in particular against the background of the broad topographic provinces outlined in the previous chapter. It then becomes apparent that – with exceptions to be noted – the distribution of early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries approximates to the basins of rivers draining into the North Sea and the English Channel – that is, it excludes what I defined earlier as the Western Province (Figure 7). This cannot be because invaders found the watershed defining the province's boundary an insurmountable obstacle to conquest, for it is marked for much of its length by relatively insignificant ranges of hills and uplands. The relationship with topography suggests instead that the cemeteries represent only the archaeologically visible aspect of a wider package of shared fashions that spread more through emulation than by the displacement of one ethnic group by another. The broad correlation of their distribution with the configuration of drainage basins would thus appear to support those who have argued that the changes in material culture apparent in the fifth and sixth centuries do not so much represent the movement of people, but of fashions, beliefs and life styles derived from the barbarian north. Nor, of course, were such contacts necessarily in a single direction or of short duration. As Hills again has observed, 'People did not get into their boats and sail to England, never to return. The communities on both sides of the North Sea remained in contact', exchanging 'ideas and goods through trade, religion and political relationships', as much as through actual migration.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 183.



**Figure 7.** The distribution of early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries (inhumation and cremation) in England and the principal rivers of the North Sea and Channel Provinces (after S. Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*).

More striking, however, is the fact that the distribution of Anglian material, and of cremation cemeteries, is nested relatively neatly within the North Sea Province (Figure 8). The distinctive features of this region may thus reflect the manner in which the rivers which articulate it have their outfalls on a coast facing out towards regions which had never been within the Roman *limes*. The south of England, in contrast, including Essex and south-west Suffolk – the Channel Province – faces France and the Low Countries, lands which had formed parts of the Roman Empire and with which, as Evison argued long ago, these districts continued to maintain close contacts. It is noteworthy that cruciform brooches and wrist clasps are forms of metalwork found widely across Scandinavia, but the round brooches which were fashionable in the south of the country are rare in Scandinavia, have debated origins and may



**Figure 8.** The distribution of cremation cemeteries and selected 'Anglian' artefacts (after S. Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*), and the watershed boundary of the North Sea Province.

in part at least represent a development of Roman traditions.<sup>20</sup> In a similar way, while cremation cemeteries are unquestionably an intrusive, north European form of disposal, this is less certainly the case with the other form of pagan burial, inhumation with grave goods, which may in fact represent not the signature of invaders, but an indigenous development of existing funerary traditions. As Hills has expressed it:

Late Roman burials were mostly unfurnished inhumations, but the later fourth century saw the appearance in Britain and northern Gaul of inhumations accompanied by weapons and belt fittings. Although these have often been

<sup>20</sup> Lucy, *Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, pp. 34–7.

interpreted as the burials of Germanic mercenary soldiers, there is not really any reason to see them purely in ethnic terms, although it does seem to have been a fashion prevalent amongst a military elite, which included men of Germanic origins. These burials may have contributed to the development of the rite [i.e., inhumation burial with grave goods] seen throughout western Europe and southern Britain between the fifth and seventh centuries.<sup>21</sup>

It is in the Channel Province, as much as in the west of England, that we find the most convincing evidence for the survival of Christianity through the fifth and sixth centuries. The most striking perhaps comes from St Albans in west Hertfordshire, which lies within an extensive area, including much of Hertfordshire, Middlesex and Essex, in which an almost complete absence of even inhumation cemeteries of the fifth and sixth centuries has encouraged a succession of scholars to posit the survival of some kind of sub-Roman population, culture and perhaps administration.<sup>22</sup> The grave of Alban, martyred in the second century at Verulamium, was probably visited by Germanus of Auxerre in the 420s, and was still venerated when Gildas was writing around a century later, for he describes how the shrine of 'sanctum Albanum Verolamiensem' could no longer be visited by Britons, presumably living in the west of England, because of the presence of barbarian settlers, presumably occupying the intervening area.<sup>23</sup> St Albans Abbey stands outside and to the east of the Roman town, on rising ground above the valley to the River Ver, in a manner reminiscent of the cathedrals at places like Tours, Arles, Cologne and Lyon in France, or Bonn in Germany, which occupy the sites of late Roman cemeteries, placed by law beyond town walls, which contained the burial places of martyrs. Bede tells us that some time after Alban's death

A church of wonderful workmanship was built, a worthy memorial to his martyrdom. To this day sick people are helped in this place and the working of frequent miracles continues to bring it renown.<sup>24</sup>

Martin Biddle's excavations on the site of the abbey chapter house in the 1970s revealed a series of ditches, of late Roman or early post-Roman date, which ran 'Precisely at right angles to the axis of the Norman abbey church, and so demonstrate that the arrangement of the abbey hill-top has preserved this alignment since at least as early as the eighth century and possibly since late Roman or immediate post-Roman times'.<sup>25</sup> Subsequent excavations revealed evidence for a late Roman cemetery beneath the south-western side of the cloisters, a cemetery which might well have included the grave (or

<sup>21</sup> Hills, 'Early Historic Britain', p. 184.

<sup>22</sup> K. Brannigan, *The Catuvellauni* (London, 1985), pp. 175–92; K. Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom: British Political Continuity 300–800* (Leicester, 1994), pp. 87–8; P. Drury and W. Rodwell, 'Settlement in the Later Iron Age and Roman Periods', in D. G. Buckley (ed.), *The Archaeology of Essex to AD 1500* (London, 1980), pp. 59–75, at p. 71; K. Rutherford Davis, *Britons and Saxons: The Chiltern Region 400–700* (Chichester, 1973); R. E. M. Wheeler, *London and the Saxons* (London, 1935), pp. 59–74.

<sup>23</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, ed. Winterbottom, p. 92.

<sup>24</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, revised edn (Oxford, 1991), p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> M. Biddle and B. Kjolbye-Biddle, 'England's Premier Abbey: The Medieval Chapter House of St Albans and its Excavation in 1978', *Hertfordshire's Past* 11 (1981), pp. 3–29, at p. 26.

supposed grave) of the martyr.<sup>26</sup> Medieval tradition – first recorded in the late eleventh century when the F version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was produced at Canterbury – held that a new church was built to replace this structure in 793 by Offa, king of Mercia, and the saint's relics translated to it.<sup>27</sup> A third-century martyr's tomb, in an extra-mural cemetery, may thus have developed, in time, into a major Saxon church and monastery, a pattern of development familiar enough in Gaul, but striking and significant here.

In this context, contrasts in the manner in which the political history of the Channel and North Sea Provinces is treated in early histories may be worth noting. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in its earlier sections largely a collection of tribal traditions, describes the takeover of Kent and the genesis of Wessex in terms of wars led by named Saxon leaders. It says nothing about the origins of Mercia or East Anglia, and little about Northumbria before the later sixth century, a regional bias perhaps unsurprising as it was originally drawn up in the kingdom of Wessex. These eastern areas doubtless had their own traditions and Wendy Davies has argued strongly for the existence of a lost chronicle, drawn up in the region and based on sources which included an early Mercian king list and a seventh-century Easter table.<sup>28</sup> This survived, she argued, into the twelfth century and was used by Henry of Huntingdon in his *Historia Anglorum* and in the *Flores Historiarum* of both Matthew Paris and Roger of Wendover. This lost source does appear to have preserved a tradition of the initial settlement of the east, and one rather different from that which we find in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. In 527, according to the version preserved in the *Flores*,

Pagans came out of Germany and occupied East Anglia . . . from where some of them invaded Mercia and waged many wars against the Britons: but because their leaders were many, they have no name.<sup>29</sup>

The precise date given is of less account than the impression conveyed of a process of settlement more chaotic in character, and characterised by small-scale land-grabbing, than that which the traditions recorded in the *Chronicle* imply occurred in the south of the country.

It is also worth noting, perhaps, that with few exceptions it is in the Channel and Western Provinces that we find examples of a particular type of place-name, first identified by Margaret Gelling in the 1970s, in which Old English elements are combined with ones derived from Latin – suggesting direct and perhaps peaceful contact between indigenous and immigrant groups. The most important of these are compounds featuring the term

<sup>26</sup> R. Niblett and I. Thompson, *Alban's Buried Towns: An Assessment of St Albans' Archaeology to AD 1600* (Oxford, 2005), p. 145; M. Biddle and B. Kjolbye-Biddle, 'The Origins of St Albans Abbey: Romano-British Cemetery and Anglo-Saxon Monastery', in M. Henig and P. Lindley (eds.), *Alban and St Albans: Roman and Medieval Architecture, Art and Archaeology* (Leeds, 2001), pp. 45–77.

<sup>27</sup> Crick, *Charters of St Albans*, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> W. Davies, 'Annals and the Origins of Mercia', in A. Dornier (ed.), *Mercian Studies* (Leicester, 1977), pp. 17–29.

<sup>29</sup> Roger of Wendover, *Rogeri de Wendover Chronica, sive Flores Historiarum*, ed. H. Coxe (London, 1841–4); H. Luard, *Flores Historiarum* (London, 1890).

*wicham*, a combination of the Latin *vicus*, 'small settlement', and Old English *ham*, 'village' or 'estate'.<sup>30</sup> Others include names featuring the Latin *campus*, 'field' – such as Sacombe in Hertfordshire; and the term *funta*, from the Latin *fons*, a fountain or well – as in Chalfont in Buckinghamshire. One or two examples lie in the North Sea Province – including Bulcamp in Suffolk, discussed in the next chapter – but the majority do not.<sup>31</sup> All this suggests that in the south of the country there was a more gradual transformation of indigenous institutions, paralleling in some ways that which took place on the other side of the Channel as Gaul became the land of the Franks.

Although evidence of continuity, however we might like to define that difficult term, can be found within the Channel Province, the fate of this region was clearly different from that of the Western Province, within which early cemeteries of any kind are only rarely found. The inhabitants of this region evidently declined to adopt the new fashions which were embraced by some at least of their neighbours to the east, and most presumably continued to practise forms of Christianity. The boundary of this province, however, appears more permeable than that between the North Sea and Channel Provinces, indicating the dangers of positing simplistic over-arching models which assume that topography was the *only* influence on patterns of contact and affiliation in the migration period, and which ignore the significance of other things which might have channelled contact and communication, such as surviving elements of the Roman road network. In particular, while the Western Province is almost entirely free of pagan Saxon cemeteries of any kind, cremation or inhumation, there is one major and some minor exceptions. The former occurs in the south-east of Warwickshire, and in the adjoining parts of Worcestershire, where a scatter of cemeteries lies on the 'wrong' side of the watershed, forming a kind of peninsula extending west into the catchment of the River Avon. This is closely associated with the line of the Fosse Way, which evidently encouraged the topographic boundary to be breached in this manner.<sup>32</sup> The same is true of almost all the minor exceptions – a scatter of cemeteries extending through eastern Somerset and western Wiltshire, which again lies to either side of the Fosse Way. Broad natural topographies do not, therefore, entirely explain the western limits of the distribution of early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, but they largely appear to do so. Moreover, the exceptions serve to reinforce the argument that networks of contact and communication, rather than patterns of physical conquest and settlement, structured the observed distributions of different kinds of material culture in fifth- and sixth-century England, a time when – as perhaps never before – social and cultural developments were shaped by influences coming from lands beyond the neighbouring seas.

<sup>30</sup> M. Gelling, *Signposts to the Past* (London, 1978), pp. 80–5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>32</sup> It is noteworthy that excavated examples display some interesting features. At Wasperton, for example, both Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon burials were present, together with some showing a mixture of both traditions.



### *The Danish settlement*

The suggestion that the character of the Roman/Saxon transition displayed a measure of regional variation which was shaped to a significant extent by topography receives some support from what we know about the next major settlement of England, by Scandinavians in the later ninth century. To judge from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* this, like the Anglo-Saxon settlement several centuries earlier, began with a phase of raiding which, starting in the 780s, continued until around 865. The *Chronicle*, because of its particular geographical bias, records most of this activity along the south coast, from Kent to Cornwall, although major raids at other places – most notably the monastery of Lindisfarne in 793 – are noted, and there can be little doubt that the other kingdoms were also suffering, and those in the east presumably to a greater extent. A second and rather different phase of activity was ushered in by the arrival of the ‘Great Army’, a large mobile fighting force, in 865. The *Chronicle* now pays more attention to events outside Wessex, presumably because of their scale and political implications, although still generally recording them in terms of regions and kingdoms, rather than individual places. It thus notes the army’s occupation of East Anglia in 865, its movement the following year into Northumbria, then into Mercia, and subsequently back to York. Finally, in 870, it describes how the Danes ‘rode across Mercia into East Anglia, and took winter-quarters at Thetford: and that winter King Edmund fought against them, and the Danish took the victory, and killed the king and conquered all that land’.<sup>33</sup> From here they raided into the east Midlands, sacking the monastery at Peterborough, then moving on into Wessex, where they fought armies led by King Æthelræd and his son Alfred, before making peace. The Great Army then withdrew to London and made peace with the Mercians, but it subsequently moved into Northumbria, and then Lindsey, before dividing. One portion returned to Northumbria again, the other proceeding, under the leadership of Guthrum, to Cambridge. At this point Scandinavian activity appears to have moved decisively from raiding and looting to permanent settlement, for the *Chronicle* describes how Northumbria was ‘shared out’ or ‘divided up’ in 876; how Mercia was partitioned in 877 and the Danish portion similarly ‘divided up’; with East Anglia likewise shared in 879.<sup>34</sup> We have no certain way of knowing precisely what the *Chronicle* means by the intriguing phrase ‘shared out’ – whether estates and revenues were being partitioned amongst a warrior elite, or whether a peasant folk-movement was under way in the lee of the conquering armies.

A third phase commenced in 879, when another mobile army occupied Fulham before moving on to France. This returned in 885 and caused trouble throughout southern England, supported by armies of Danes already settled in East Anglia and Northumbria. This body continued to operate until 897,

<sup>33</sup> M. Swanton (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London, 1996), p. 70.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74–6.

when, in the words of the *Chronicle*, its members dispersed, 'some to East Anglia, some to Northumbria, and those without stock got themselves ships there, and sailed overseas to the Seine'. After 897 we hear no more of large, mobile Scandinavian armies, although smaller bands of pirates mounted various raids on southern England. Between 897 and 941 the *Chronicle* mainly deals with the relationship between the English – the West Saxons and their allies – and the Danes settled in the east of the country, describing both sporadic raiding and longer periods of warfare. It was only under Alfred's son Edward the Elder, in alliance with his sister Æthelflæd of Mercia, that a successful campaign was waged which brought the Danish-settled lands under English control, a process which was completed in the area to the south of the Humber by 918, although York remained under Scandinavian rule until 954.

As already noted, in the late 870s not only Northumbria and East Anglia were occupied and 'shared', but also the eastern parts of Mercia, the rest being ceded to the English king Ceolwulf. The precise area of Danish rule in England, and by implication the main areas of settlement, is sometimes thought to be defined by the terms of a treaty – the text of which survives – which was probably drawn up between Guthrum and Alfred at Wedmore in 879, as Dumville and others have argued, although Stenton and Davis favoured a date in the late 880s.<sup>35</sup> This fixed the boundary between Saxons and Danes along the line of the Thames as far as its confluence with the Lea; then up the Lea to its source, near Leagrave in Bedfordshire; from there in a straight line to Bedford; and then along the river Ouse to Watling Street. According to conventional wisdom, 'Danish' territory thus embraced not only the east Midlands and East Anglia, but also Essex. Dumville, however, has provided a radical reinterpretation of this frontier. He has drawn attention to the fact that the *Chronicle*, while making it clear that eastern Mercia and East Anglia were over-run by the Danes, is more circumspect in its treatment of Essex. Danish armies are mentioned in the north-east of the county, but 'When they wanted a safe base for their women or chattels, Essex was not [the Vikings'] first choice but East Anglia. All these facts suggest that . . . Essex was territory that was being debated'.<sup>36</sup> In 894 the Danes thus 'gathered together a great raiding-army from East Anglia and from Northumbria before winter; and secured their women and their ships and their money in East Anglia', before marching across the country to Chester.<sup>37</sup> The *Chronicle* never specifically states that Essex was occupied by Danish armies, and an entry for 896, looking back to events earlier in the 880s and 890s, recalled the deaths of 'many of the king's best thegns' – including Brihtwulf, *ealdorman* of Essex.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 260–1; R. H. C. Davis, 'Alfred and Guthrum's Frontier', *English Historical Review* 97 (1982), pp. 803–10; D. Dumville, *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar: Six Essays on Political, Cultural and Ecclesiastical Revival* (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 14–15.

<sup>36</sup> Dumville, *Wessex and England*, pp. 8–9.

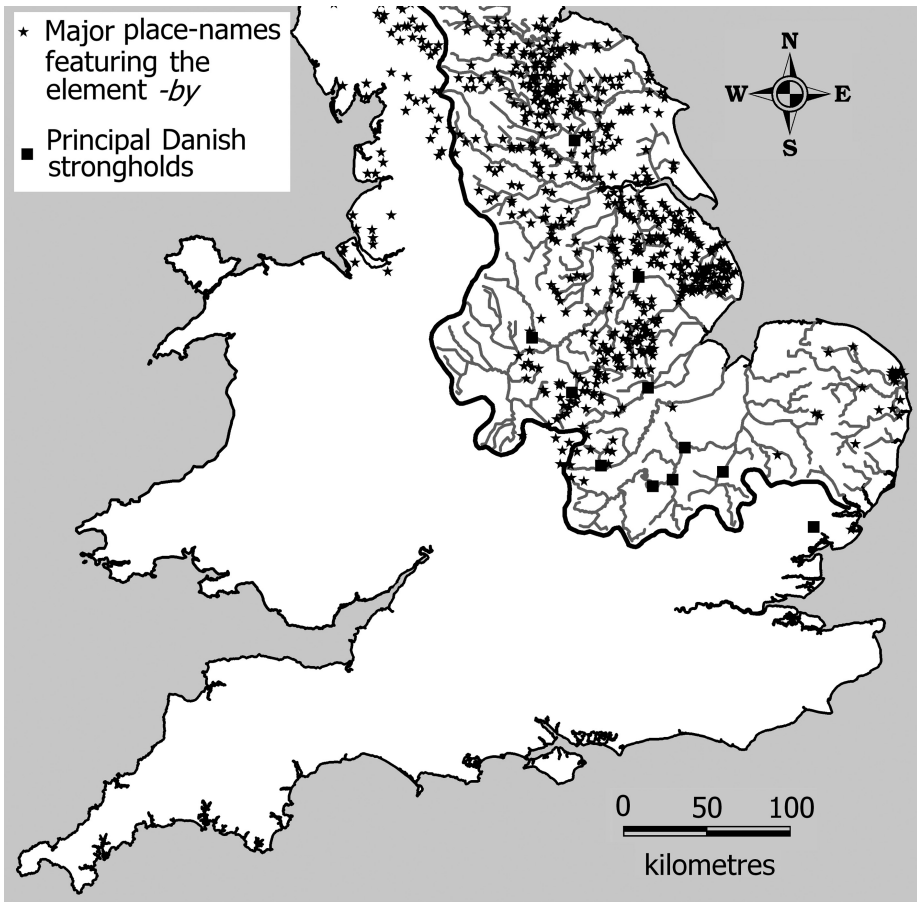
<sup>37</sup> Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, p. 88.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

So far as the evidence goes, Essex had been effectively incorporated into the West Saxon kingdom in the 820s, and it would appear that control was never subsequently relinquished, except in the north-east of the present county, in the area around Colchester. How, then, are we to interpret the boundary described in the treaty, which appears to place Essex firmly within the Danelaw? Dumville and others have argued, as I have noted, that this dates to 879, before Alfred's occupation of London, and of the territories in south-east Mercia seized by the Danes, in 886. In other words, according to Dumville, the conventional reading of the treaty is back to front. It was the territory to the south and west of the line, in Mercia, which was in Danish hands: Essex was still at this point controlled by the English. Dumville has also argued, surely correctly, that the Alfred/Guthrum treaty was not some kind of lasting peace which fixed the cultural and ethnic geography of England with a measure of permanence, but a temporary agreement which must have become irrelevant with the occupation of London and the neighbouring lands in 886. Beyond suggesting that Essex remained largely in English hands, it can tell us little that is useful about the main areas of Danish influence and settlement. Figure 9 adopts a different approach. It maps the location of the principal Danish strongholds listed in the *Chronicle* (the 'Five Boroughs' – Derby, Northampton, Leicester, Stamford and Lincoln; together with York, Huntingdon, Bedford, Cambridge, Colchester and Tempsford); and the distribution of major Scandinavian place-names featuring the element *by*. The forts are, with the exception of that at Colchester, neatly nested within the North Sea Province, as are *-by* names, with the exception of a concentration in the far north-west of England. These represent the influence of Norwegian rather than Danish settlers, an influence that was evidently stronger in the north of the Irish Sea Province than in the south. This lack of provincial homogeneity is perhaps to be explained by the area's extreme distance from the Norse homelands, which ensured less intense and less regular contacts than those which connected Denmark and the North Sea Province.

The reason why Essex appears to have remained under English control – in spite of the fact that it lay some way from the main centres of West Saxon power, had a long exposed sea coast and was not divided from East Anglia proper by impassable hills or a major watercourse – now perhaps becomes clearer. The same pattern of rivers, drainage basins and watersheds which structured, as I have argued, aspects of the English settlement, now shaped the geographical character of another wave of immigration and cultural influences. Topographic factors may likewise explain why Mercia was divided between Danes and English, rather than being occupied *in toto* by the Danes: that great kingdom lay astride the boundary of the Western and the North Sea Province, and only that portion lying within the latter fell under Scandinavian control.

It is certainly difficult to explain this geography of Danish conquest, settlement and influence in terms of the chance pattern of military success, or as a consequence of the movement of armies by water. The *Chronicle* makes it



**Figure 9.** Principal Danish strongholds, Danish place names, and the North Sea Province.

clear that ships could be important in campaigns, but it also suggests that the Danish armies more usually rode overland on horseback. Moreover, while the Five Boroughs and the other major bases listed were all probably located on navigable waterways, the higher reaches of the rivers whose catchments defined the North Sea Province would not have been navigable by ships of any significant size. Evidently, the correspondence of Danish influence with topographic patterns needs to be explained at least in part in social terms, something which in turn raises important questions about the nature of the Scandinavian settlement.

Like the settlement by the Angles and Saxons in the fourth and fifth centuries, although perhaps to a lesser extent, the scale and character of that by the Danes in the ninth century remains a subject for debate. Most place-name experts, and some historians like Stenton and Dodwell, have

argued that large numbers of Danes came either as members of, or in the wake of, the various armies whose movements we read of in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.<sup>39</sup> Others, such as R. C. H. Davis and Peter Sawyer, have suggested that there were only small numbers of incomers, a conquering elite.<sup>40</sup> Such disagreements result, in part, from the ambiguous character of the documentary evidence: the *Chronicle* gives no clear impression of the size of the Viking armies and as Sawyer pointed out in the 1960s the term *here* which it uses for the various armed groups, usually translated as 'army' or 'host', was employed in seventh-century laws for any collection of more than thirty-five hostile men.<sup>41</sup> It is true that the entry in the *Chronicle* for 876, which describes how the Viking leader Halfdan 'shared out the lands of Northumbria, and they were engaged in ploughing and making a living for themselves', suggests a measure of peasant settlement, but for the most part the arguments for a fully fledged folk movement rely on the evidence of place-names, and on the existence in eastern England, in late Saxon times, of idiosyncratic features of social organisation, especially the high density of free men and sokemen, groups of free peasants who were interpreted as the descendants of the demobbed Viking armies.

The latter I shall return to later. Suffice it to say at this stage that the distribution of peasant freedom is not as closely correlated with other evidence for Viking activity as is sometimes suggested; the term 'sokeman' is an English rather than Danish one; and few historians would today interpret the institutional idiosyncrasies of early-medieval eastern England as a consequence of large-scale peasant immigration from Scandinavia in the ninth century.<sup>42</sup> The place-name evidence is more complicated. On the one hand, as Abrams and Parsons have shown, the large number of major place-names featuring the element *by* are mainly compounded with Norse personal names and were probably coined largely in the ninth century, facts which suggest the presence of 'Scandinavian settlers beyond a small military elite'.<sup>43</sup> In a similar way, the large number of minor names – field names and the like – incorporating Scandinavian elements to be found in eastern England again suggests a significant folk movement. Terms like *bekkr*, 'stream'; *bryggja*, 'jetty, quay'; *haugr*, 'hill, tumulus'; *stigr*, 'path'; and *gata*, 'road', seem to be coined by a population of farmers rather than an elite of warriors. Both in this respect, and in terms of the sheer number of major place-names showing Scandinavian influence, there is a marked contrast with the situation after the Norman Conquest,

<sup>39</sup> Dodwell, 'The Free Peasantry of East Anglia in Domesday'; Stenton, 'The Historical Bearing of Place-Name Studies'. For a recent review of the debate see Hadley, *The Vikings in England*, pp. 2–17.

<sup>40</sup> Sawyer, *Age of the Vikings*; Davis, 'East Anglia and the Danelaw'.

<sup>41</sup> As in the Laws of Ine of Wessex: Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 366. See Sawyer, *Age of the Vikings*, p. 131.

<sup>42</sup> Hadley, *The Northern Danelaw*, p. 92.

<sup>43</sup> L. Abrams and D. Parsons, 'Place-Names and the History of Scandinavian Settlement in England', in J. Hines, A. Lane and M. Redknap (eds.), *Land, Sea and Home* (Leeds, 2004), pp. 379–431.

for very few place-names incorporate Norman-French terms.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, there are marked differences within eastern England in the density of Danish names, which do not necessarily imply variations in the intensity of settlement. Major place-names featuring terms like *by* are common in the northern Danelaw but they are much rarer in East Anglia, where they tend to cluster in restricted areas, as on the former island of Flegg to the north of Great Yarmouth, although minor place-names displaying Scandinavian influence are common. In Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire, in contrast, Scandinavian terms are relatively rare in both major and minor names. Such patterns are almost certainly the outcome of many complex influences, including variations in the development of territorial organisation and in the formation of settlements during the late Saxon period, and should not be read as a direct indication of the scale of Danish immigration. In Hadley's words, 'it seems clear that the place-name distribution map is not a straightforward index of Scandinavian settlement'.<sup>45</sup> Some of the minor names in particular were certainly coined at a relatively late date, long after the ninth century, and thus reflect a more general and long-lived liking for Scandinavian terms, if not a wholesale and general adoption of elements of the Old Norse language. This in turn, however, makes the relationship between place-names and topography even more intriguing, for the distributions of both major and minor names seem to drop off sharply at the major watersheds defining the North Sea Province. Scandinavian terms are thus found, if in limited numbers, in the place-names of Norfolk and north-eastern Suffolk; but in south-west Suffolk they are rare, while in Essex place-names show 'but slight traces of any Scandinavian settlement'.<sup>46</sup>

The fact that Danish place-names, as well as Danish political control, were constrained within the North Sea Province by relatively minor topographic features again suggests that emulation and influence were at least as important in creating the Scandinavian character of eastern and north-eastern England as the replacement of one ethnic population by another, and that we are dealing with patterns created by long-term cultural processes, rather than by military and political events occurring within a short period in the ninth century. Once again, invasion appears to have been one part of a wider flow of influences, which included trade and the exchange of artefacts and, above all, the widespread adoption of fashions (including aspects of language and name-giving) amongst the indigenous population. We should also note that the cultural character of the north-east was also forged by rapid assimilation. Christianity appears, from the paucity of known pagan burials, to have been adopted by the incomers at a very early stage. Moreover, while metal-detectorists and excavators have recovered vast quantities of metalwork from eastern and north-eastern England which shows strong Scandinavian influence, the overwhelming majority of artefacts actually display a fusion

<sup>44</sup> Gelling, *Signposts*, p. 236.

<sup>45</sup> Hadley, *The Vikings in England*, p. 103.

<sup>46</sup> A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Essex* (Cambridge, 1935), p. xxviii.



of English and Viking styles. Purely Scandinavian objects, such as the oval brooches worn by Viking women, are rare, suggesting a rapid adoption by the incomers of indigenous styles of dress.<sup>47</sup>

Both the extent and the rapidity of assimilation within the North Sea Province may be indicated by the remarkable way in which the *Chronicle* seems at times to elide the names of conquerors and conquered. In thus describes how in 894, a year after the 'host' had made their fort at Louvain in France, 'the Northumbrians and East Anglians had granted oaths to King Alfred, and the East Anglians six prime hostages, and yet, contrary to the pledge, as often as the other raiding-armies went out in full force, then they went either with them or alone on their own behalf', while in 906 Edward made peace at Tiddingford near Linslade in Bedfordshire 'both with the East Anglians and with the Northumbrians'.<sup>48</sup> One particularly striking passage implies that the word 'Dane' could, by the middle of the tenth century, be used to mean something close to 'inhabitant of eastern England'. In the A version for 942, for example, there is a verse stanza commemorating the achievements of King Edmund:

Here King Edward, lord of the English  
Guardian of kinsmen, beloved instigator of deeds,  
Conquered Mercia, bounded by the Dore,  
Whitwell Gap and Humber river,  
Broad ocean-stream; five boroughs:  
Leicester and Lincoln,  
And Nottingham, likewise Stamford also  
And Derby. Earlier the Danes were  
Under the Norsemen, subjected by force  
In heathen's captive fetters.<sup>49</sup>

But there may just possibly be hints here, in the implication that the inhabitants of the east were already in some sense distinct *before* the arrival of the Vikings, that Scandinavian influence in this part of England had a longer history than we usually assume: that is, the Anglo-Saxon and Danish settlements may not in reality have been separated by a period of three centuries or more in which there were no significant contacts across the North Sea. The fact that the epic Old English poem *Beowulf* is set in southern Scandinavia – in Denmark and central/southern Sweden – and describes various artefacts and practices, such as boat burial, which are of late-sixth or seventh-century date, has been taken by some to indicate continuing connections with the Northern world long after the period of the English settlement. Other scholars, in contrast, have suggested that the poem is only as old as the earliest surviving manuscript versions – the early eleventh century – and that, while

<sup>47</sup> G. Thomas, 'Anglo-Scandinavian Metalwork from the Danelaw: Exploring Social and Cultural Interaction', in D. Hadley and J. Richards (eds.), *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (Turnhout, 2000), pp. 237–55.

<sup>48</sup> Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, pp. 84, 94.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

it might incorporate earlier poems, it was essentially a work of that date. Any knowledge of Scandinavia it displays would thus be explicable in terms of the renewed contacts consequent on the Viking incursions.<sup>50</sup> This seems unlikely, however, given that the poem contains no Viking Age Norse words or personal names, and Sam Newton has made a convincing case that it was originally composed as early as the eighth century, although based on earlier oral traditions.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, while it has been argued that the poem originated in a Mercian court, Newton's arguments for an East Anglian origin appear convincing, not least because of the strong connections with Scandinavia manifested in the late-sixth- and early-seventh-century burials at Sutton Hoo, the burial ground of the *Wuffingas* on the Suffolk coast.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, as Hines argued many decades ago, in a number of respects – especially in styles of metalwork – the archaeology of Anglian England suggests continued contacts with the north through the late-sixth and seventh centuries and into the eighth.<sup>53</sup> Hines also drew attention to the way in which Alcuin, writing to King Ethelred of Northumbria shortly after the great Danish raid on the monastery of Lindisfarne in 793, included the following striking criticism of the indigenous population and its rulers:

Consider the dress, the hair-style, and the luxurious habits of the princes and people. Look at the hair-style, how you have wished to imitate the pagans in your beards and hair. Does not the terror threaten of those whose hair-style you wished to have?<sup>54</sup>

It is hard to think what other pagan group Alcuin could have had in mind at this stage, and the implication is thus that, even before the first Viking attacks, Scandinavian cultural influence was strong in the Northumbrian kingdom.

It is true that other eighth-century sources, most notably Bede, make no allusion to the lands of the Northmen, while the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* account of the arrival of the first raiders implies something completely and frighteningly novel. But Bede, principally concerned with the progress of the Christian Church in England, would have had little cause to mention contacts with the pagan north. Moreover, as Hines pointed out, the *Chronicle's* account of the Viking's first appearance in Wessex in 787 can be read in more than one way. It describes how the king's reeve rode to meet three ships 'and wanted to compel them to go to the king's town, because he did not know what they were, and they killed him. Those were the first ships of the Danish men who sought out the land of the English race'.<sup>55</sup> As Hines noted, however, the verb *gesecan*, usually translated 'come to' or 'sought out', can also mean 'attack'. If this was the intended sense, then these were not

<sup>50</sup> K. Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (New Jersey, 1981); K. Kiernan, 'The Eleventh-Century Origins of *Beowulf* and the *Beowulf* Manuscript', in C. Chase (ed.), *The Dating of Beowulf* (Toronto, 1981), pp. 9–22.

<sup>51</sup> S. Newton, *The Origins of Beowulf and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia* (Cambridge, 1983).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. pp. 64–70; Peter Warner, *The Origins of Suffolk* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 76–7.

<sup>53</sup> Hines, *The Scandinavian Character of Anglian England*.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>55</sup> Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, p. 54.

the first Scandinavians who arrived on the shore of Wessex, but rather the first who came with hostile intent.<sup>56</sup> Alternatively, of course, visitors from the North may simply have been much rarer in Wessex than in Mercia, East Anglia or Northumbria.

### *Conclusion*

Examining the evidence for the English and Danish settlements within the topographic context of watersheds and drainage basins may help to explain their spatial character, and also throw light on their character more generally. However few, or many, the immigrants in either case may have been the distributions of intrusive artefacts and practices appear to mirror the spatial configuration of the communities which adopted new fashions and beliefs, rather than indicating the specific areas settled by the immigrants themselves. The relationship of these patterns to the structures of topography may in part reflect the way that the movement of invading elites, and routes of trade and exchange, were channelled by the configuration of seas, coasts and watercourses. But for the most part it seems to indicate the influence of river and wold, at a national scale, on patterns of social contact, and thus on the formation of social identities.

Some readers may wonder at this point why I have said little about the new genetic approaches to the question of how many Anglo-Saxon settlers came here in the fifth or sixth centuries: that is, of the attempts which have been made to map patterns of present-day genetic variation amongst the British population and relate these to the numbers, and distribution, of Dark Age immigrants. Such studies have, in fact, been bedevilled by the difficulties involved in distinguishing whether the presence of particular forms of DNA, most notably the Danish Y chromosome, indicates settlement by Anglo-Saxons *or* by Danish Vikings. They have, nevertheless, suggested that these genetic traces are strongest in East Anglia, the Midlands and the north-east, and become weaker towards both the west and the south, broadly following the configuration of the North Sea Province, and mirroring the various cultural distributions so far discussed.<sup>57</sup> This does not, of course, mean that this area was very densely settled by newcomers from Scandinavia, in either period. As Charles Phythian Adams and others have demonstrated, even in the post-medieval period major topographic features like watersheds tended to correspond with marriage horizons.<sup>58</sup> The observed pattern may thus indicate simply the social dominance, and thus superior opportunities for reproduction, of an immigrant elite *within* the communities occupying the

<sup>56</sup> Hines, *The Scandinavian Character of Anglian England*, p. 294.

<sup>57</sup> Cook, 'Viking Genetics Survey Results'; Weale *et al.*, 'Y Chromosome Evidence for Anglo-Saxon Mass Migration'; C. Capelli, N. Redhead, J. K. Abernethy, F. Gratrix, J. F. Wilson, T. Moen, T. Hervig, M. Richards, M. P. H. Stumpf, P. A. Underhill, P. Bradshaw, A. Shaha, M. G. Thomas, N. Bradman and D. B. Goldstein, 'A Y Chromosome Census of the British Isles', *Current Biology* 13/11 (2003), pp. 979–84.

<sup>58</sup> Phythian Adams, *Re-thinking English Local History*, pp. 34–42.

North Sea Province. All this anyway assumes that genetic idiosyncrasies can be associated, in an unproblematic manner, with these two particular phases of history, ignoring the possibility that in earlier periods – perhaps extending back to early prehistory – there were also significant contacts between the eastern parts of England and southern Scandinavia.<sup>59</sup> The configuration of ‘three provinces’ may have been an important, if intermittent, influence on the settlement of England for millennia.

<sup>59</sup> S. Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British: A Genetic Detective Story* (London, 2007).

## 4

### Small Shires, Deep Roots

#### *Regiones and their contexts*

In earlier chapters two models for the development of early settlement and territorial organisation in England were introduced and discussed: Glanville Jones's idea of the multiple estate, and the concept of river and wold, formulated by Alan Everitt and elaborated in a variety of ways by Harold Fox and Charles Phythian Adams.<sup>1</sup> Although the two models were largely developed in isolation from each other, and approached early settlement and land use from rather different perspectives, it is clear that there is a measure of congruence between them, both dealing as they do with forms of territorial organisation significantly larger than the townships or parishes of the later Middle Ages. Everitt's model provides a topographic frame for the large territories described by Jones, in the sense that the outlying portions of the latter would generally have coincided with major watersheds, while its core sections, the *maenor* and main areas of arable land, would have been located within a valley, or valleys. In the ideal model set out in the Welsh law codes the king's court or *llys* is thus supplied with produce by the mensal lands of the *maerdref*, located in the arable lowlands.<sup>2</sup> The king's other townships were in the summer pastures of the uplands, suggesting forms of extensive rather than intensive land use, involving a measure of seasonal transhumance. Many researchers, discussing the character of multiple estates and similar archaic territories, have noted their close relationship with the topography.

In Chapter 1 I discussed some of the problems with the multiple-estate model, noting that it provides little more than an over-formulaic and essentially Welsh version of the kind of territorial lordship represented in the English sources by districts whose inhabitants rendered food-rents and some services to a royal vill, an arrangement for which the term 'estate', with its connotations of ownership and tenancy, seems inappropriate. But it is also important to note that these districts might themselves have a coherence, and an antiquity, independent of the systems of surplus extraction of which they formed a part. They were, in many cases, natural regions, related to topographic structures: they were organic developments from below, rather than simply being artificial impositions from above. There are, moreover, grounds for believing

<sup>1</sup> Jones, 'The Multiple Estate as a Model Framework'; Jones, 'Multiple Estates and Early Settlement'; Everitt, 'River and Wold'; Fox, 'The People of the Wolds'; Phythian Adams, *Re-thinking English Local History*.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, 'Multiple Estates and Early Settlement', pp. 9–11.

that many originated as autonomous tribal territories which retained their identity during the gradual emergence of larger kingdoms in the course of the later sixth and seventh centuries. Where tribute and allegiance had once been rendered to a petty chieftain, they were now paid to a king. Such a territory was, in other words, the kind of unit which the historian Bede and other early sources described as a *regio*: in Faith's words, the "'small shires" which had deep roots and long lives', the 'resource territory of a small people'.<sup>3</sup>

In an important article Steven Bassett discussed the Rodings, a group of eight parishes in south-west Essex, making a convincing case that all originally formed a single ecclesiastical territory based on a minster located at White or Magna Roding: the church here held glebe land in some of the adjacent parishes late in the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup> The fact that the main manor in White Roding remained a royal demesne in 1066 suggests that this was also the royal tun to which the inhabitants of the surrounding settlements had once rendered tribute. But the parishes' shared name indicates an earlier, tribal origin for this territory, as the land of 'Hroða's people'. The eight parishes lay either side of the River Roding, extending up to the watersheds on either side. In Bassett's words, 'As a group the Rodings parishes make up a coherent block of land which . . . conforms well to the prevailing local topography'. Another example is the territory based on Blythburgh on the east Suffolk coast, discussed by Peter Warner. This place, now a small village with a magnificent church, was evidently an important royal centre within the East Anglian kingdom by the middle of the seventh century; it was probably while defending this place against a Mercian army led by Penda that King Anna and his son were killed at nearby Bulcamp in 654.<sup>5</sup> Anna himself is said to have been buried at Blythburgh, suggesting that the church was a minster, and according to the medieval *Liber Eliensis* he was still being venerated there in the twelfth century.<sup>6</sup> The second element of the place-name, *burgh*, was often employed in middle Saxon times for enclosed minster sites. The first element derives from the name of the river which runs through the place, the Blyth, and also appears in the name of the hundred in which it lies, Blything Hundred. The river flows more or less through the centre of the hundred, entering the sea just below Blythburgh; the hundred's boundaries correspond with the watersheds separating its drainage basin from those of rivers lying to north and south. Again, a territory, topographically defined, began as that of a tribal group – the *Bliðingas*, 'the people of the River Blyth' – before becoming a district focused on a *villa regis* in one of the early kingdoms, and finally a hundred within a united English kingdom.

The fact that a hamlet in the west of this parish, and the site of the battle in 654, is called Bulcamp is noteworthy, for the name incorporates the relatively rare *camp* element, already discussed (p. 00), with its implications of continuity between Roman and early Saxon settlement and territorial organisation. There

<sup>3</sup> Faith, 'Forms of Dominance', p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Bassett, 'Continuity and Fission'.

<sup>5</sup> Warner, *Origins of Suffolk*, pp. 120–1 and pp. 156–9.

<sup>6</sup> E. O. Blake (ed.), *Liber Eliensis* (Oxford, 1962), p. 18.



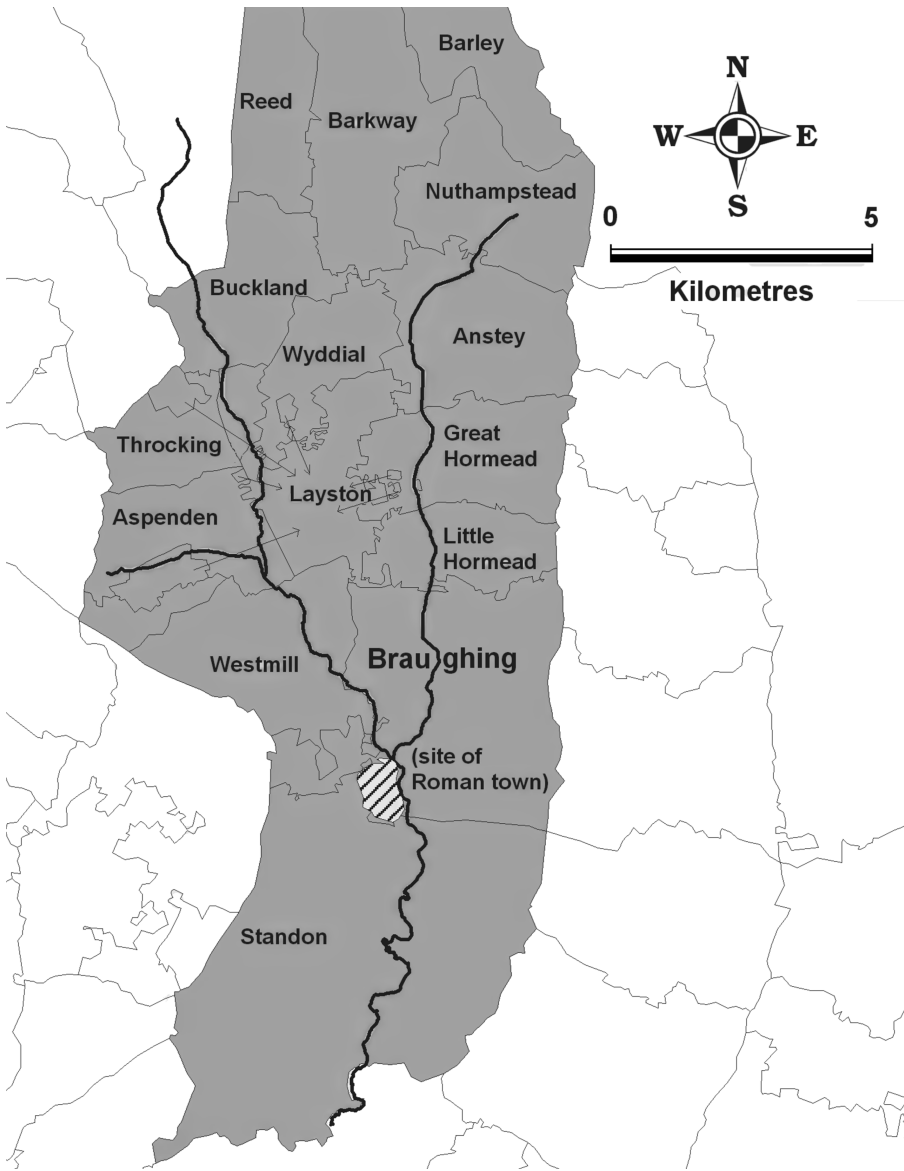
are often, in fact, hints that some of these ancient territories had pre-Saxon origins, as subdivisions within Iron Age tribes and/or Roman administrative units. A territory based on Braughing, now a small village in east Hertfordshire near the confluence of the Rivers Rib and Quin, is a particularly good example.<sup>7</sup> The village lies near the latter river, with the slopes of the wide valley, characterised by light, freely draining soils of the Melford Association and Stretham Series, rising to a poorly draining boulder-clay plateau above. Immediately to the south-west of the village is the site of an extensive Iron Age *oppidum*, which developed into the second-largest Roman town in Hertfordshire. The village's name, 'the people of Brahha', may well derive from a tribal group which occupied the site in the immediate post-Roman period: some kind of continuity of occupation is certainly suggested by the fact that one of only three Hertfordshire examples of a *wicham* name (see above, pp. 70–1), Wickham Hill, coincides precisely with the main built-up area of the Roman town. It seems likely that the territory of this group was absorbed at an early date into the kingdom of the East Saxons – it probably comprised, in fact, most of the part of the county of Hertfordshire which was incorporated into that kingdom, the larger (western) portion coming in time to form a part of Mercia.<sup>8</sup> The boundary between the two kingdoms within Hertfordshire may be preserved by that between the medieval diocese of London – originally the bishopric for the East Saxon kingdom – and the diocese of Lichfield, later Leicester, then Dorchester and ultimately Lincoln – serving Mercian territory. The division between the two runs along the high watershed to the west of the village, between the River Rib and the River Beane. As late as 825, when 10 hides of land at Braughing were leased by Bishop Ceolberht of London and the community of St Paul's to Sigric, 'minister' of Wiglaf, king of Mercia, one of the witnesses was 'Sigeric rex Orientalum Saxonum' – probably Sigered, last king of the East Saxons, who ruled his kingdom under Mercian overlordship until it was conquered, soon after this document was drawn up, by the West Saxons.<sup>9</sup>

Even after the kingdom of Essex had been incorporated into the unified kingdom of England, Braughing seems to have retained a role as a central place. The fact that it provided the meeting place for, and gave its name to, the hundred within which it lies strongly suggests that it was still a *villa regis* in the early tenth century. It was no longer in royal hands at the time of Domesday, although we are told that the two thegns who held the manor before the Conquest could not sell their lands 'because they always lay in the alms [lands] in the time of King Edward and of all his predecessors'. As David Short has noted, the configuration of the boundaries of a large number of parishes extending some way to the north up the valley of the Rib suggests that they originally formed a single ecclesiastical territory (Figure 10), the western boundary of which was coterminous with that of

<sup>7</sup> D. Short, 'Braughing: A Possible Saxon Estate?', *Hertfordshire's Past* 23 (1988), pp. 8–15; Williamson, *Origins of Hertfordshire*, pp. 126–9.

<sup>8</sup> Williamson, *Origins of Hertfordshire*, pp. 90–102.

<sup>9</sup> M. Gelling, *The Early Charters of the Thames Valley* (Leicester, 1979), pp. 81–2.



**Figure 10.** The Saxon estate at Braughing, Hertfordshire (after D. Short, 'Braughing: a Possible Saxon Estate?').

the diocese, running as noted along the watershed between the Rib and the Beane, while the eastern followed the watershed between the Quin and the Ash.<sup>10</sup> The will of the noblewoman Æthelgifu, drawn up in c. 970, bequeathed

<sup>10</sup> Short, 'Braughing', pp. 10–13.

the reversion of half her estate at Munden, food-rents while one Ælfwold held it, and cattle from Standon, to a minster at Braughing, and the present parish church contains fragments of Anglo-Saxon stonework.<sup>11</sup> The village retained an ecclesiastical importance into the later Middle Ages, the 1291 *Taxatio Ecclesiastica* informing us that it was the head of a rural deanery.<sup>12</sup>

Braughing was thus a place of importance in the Iron Age and Roman periods, and apparently constituted all or part of one of the tribal building blocks out of which an early kingdom – Essex – was constructed. There seems little doubt that by the tenth century, and probably for long before, it was both an important *villa regis* and the site of a minster. The place is thus a particularly clear example of a much wider phenomenon: of how the territories focused on royal villas could have very ancient origins, and of how they were neatly nested within the local topography. In the examples I have so far discussed the latter comprises, essentially, a valley or valley system but in some districts other kinds of contrast between river and wold were important – in the chalklands of southern England, for example, wide escarpments of light soil, rising from a springline to a clay-capped plateau above.<sup>13</sup> In most areas, however, we see the same essential contrast between primary settlement zones and arable cores, and wider areas of woodland and pasture.

### *Hundreds and watersheds*

The way in which Braughing gave its name to one of Hertfordshire's hundreds is typical. Hundreds or wapentakes, as we have seen, were administrative subdivisions of shires which were first established in later Saxon times, although their boundaries were sometimes, in certain cases on a number of occasions, altered in the course of the Middle Ages. They were not in themselves the territories based on royal villas through which early kings had collected tribute: they belonged to a more sophisticated age, in which taxation was levied on land, and (at least notionally) rendered in money. Yet in many cases they seem to have developed from such early units, or from groups of them; and these had sometimes, in turn, originated as ancient folk territories. While most hundreds thus bore the name of the place where the hundred court met, often a major royal villa, some – such as Braughing or Hitchin in Hertfordshire, or Loddon and Clavering in Norfolk – bore those of early Saxon tribes.

One sign that hundreds and wapentakes were descended in part from more ancient territories, and were not simply arbitrary creations of late Saxon administrators, is the way that they often displayed a clear relationship with the natural topography. In many areas of England, as we have already noted, their boundaries either followed major rivers or, more usually, the watersheds

<sup>11</sup> Crick, *Charters of St Albans*, no. 7.

<sup>12</sup> T. Astle, S. Ayscough, and J. Caley (eds.), *Taxatio Ecclesiastica Angliae et Walliae Auctoritate P. Nicholai IV circa AD 1291* (London, 1802).

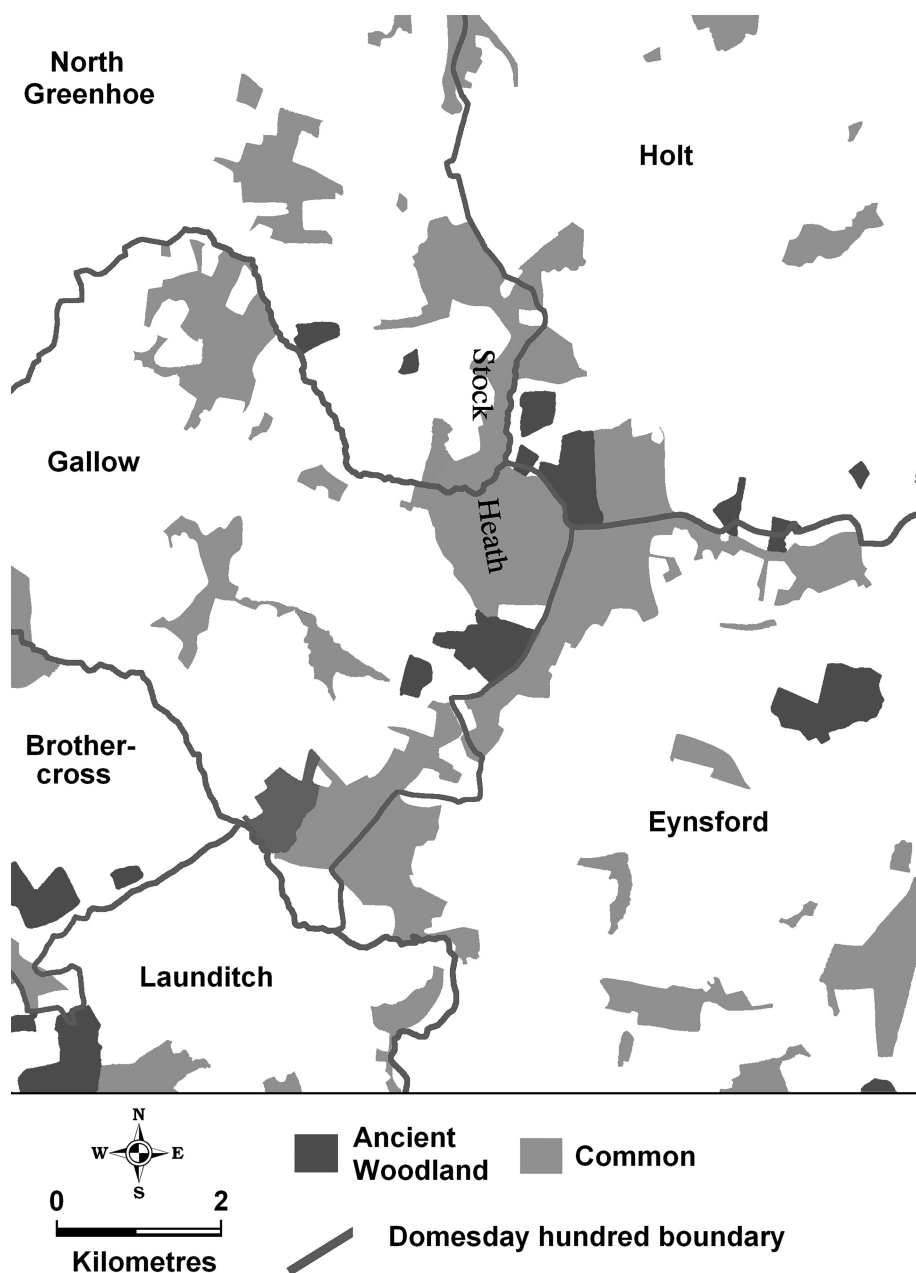
<sup>13</sup> Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, pp. 19–20.

lying between major valleys and drainage systems. They also displayed some association with the larger tracts of common land, and with concentrations of ancient woodland, which survived into the later Middle Ages and beyond, although in most parts of England this is difficult to demonstrate because, by the time that detailed and accurate maps showing entire counties or other extensive areas were produced in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, most commons had been enclosed and much ancient woodland grubbed out as part of the rage for 'agricultural improvement'.

The county of Norfolk is fortunate in this respect as William Faden's remarkably detailed map, surveyed in 1794–5, predates the great wave of enclosures that occurred in that county during the Napoleonic Wars. We can thus see quite clearly the way in which, in many places, hundred boundaries, like that which ran between Holt and North Greenhoe and continued as that between Eynesford and Gallow, followed for many kilometres chains of commons strung along watersheds, in this case dividing the drainage basin of the Glaven from those of the Stiffkey and the Wensum. Extensive commons were a noticeable feature of the points where a number of hundreds met, as on Stock Heath in the centre/north of the county, where Eynesford, Gallow, Holt and North Greenhoe all converged (Figure 11).<sup>14</sup> Stock Heath is a good example of another phenomenon. Careful scrutiny of Faden's map reveals that a high proportion (around 39 per cent) of the surviving areas of medieval coppiced woodland abutted directly upon a common, and in many cases woods, private wood-pastures, wooded commons and open commons formed large, contiguous or near-contiguous clusters. Stock Heath was one of the largest commons in the county and was connected to a number of neighbouring areas of common land – Fulmondeston Common, Hindolveston Common and Orbury Common. Attached to these, moreover, were several areas of ancient woodland – including Swanton Novers Great Wood – together with an extensive block of private wood-pasture, Fulmondeston Severals, which had probably been enclosed from the adjacent common in the late-medieval or early post-medieval period. Similar, if less extensive, clusters of woods, commons and wood-pastures can be found elsewhere on the map, usually where a number of hundreds converge and usually, as here, on a high interfluvium. Such contiguity indicates that all had common origins, as communal grazing grounds on the fringes of valley-based territories, the boundaries of which were, to varying degrees, perpetuated in those of medieval hundreds. In a rather similar manner, Higham has noted how in Cheshire 'belts of woodland names' coincide with hundred boundaries: 'the hundreds in their current form were probably formed early in the tenth century, but reflect in part pre-existing divisions'.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> A. D. M MacNair and T. Williamson, *William Faden and Norfolk's Eighteenth-Century Landscape* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 183–96.

<sup>15</sup> N. J. Higham, 'Forests, Woodland and Settlement in Medieval Cheshire: A Note', *Annual Report of the Medieval Settlement Research Group* 4 (1989), pp. 24–5.



**Figure 11.** Common land, woods and hundred boundaries in north Norfolk. This map is redrawn from William Faden's map of the county, published 1797 (courtesy A.D. MacNair).

*Watershed tracks and boundaries*

Hundred or wapentake boundaries do not always, of course, follow watersheds in this kind of manner. But many watersheds are marked by prominent linear features, often roads or tracks, which are now followed (if at all) only by more local boundaries – those of parishes or townships – and even then not always in a continuous way. That is, a boundary will run up to the watershed feature, follow it for a while and then leave it, that of another township behaving in the same manner a little further along. The importance of linear features on watersheds was first noted in 1914 by R. Hippisley Cox in his book *The Green Roads of England*, in which he posited a complex system of prehistoric watershed trackways, linking hillforts and Neolithic monuments like Avebury and Stonehenge.<sup>16</sup> His own definition of what constituted a watershed tended to be loose, but there is no doubt both that roadways closely following watersheds are a common but generally unremarked feature of the English landscape, and that they are often of some antiquity. Whether they were originally or primarily roads is a matter to which I shall return.

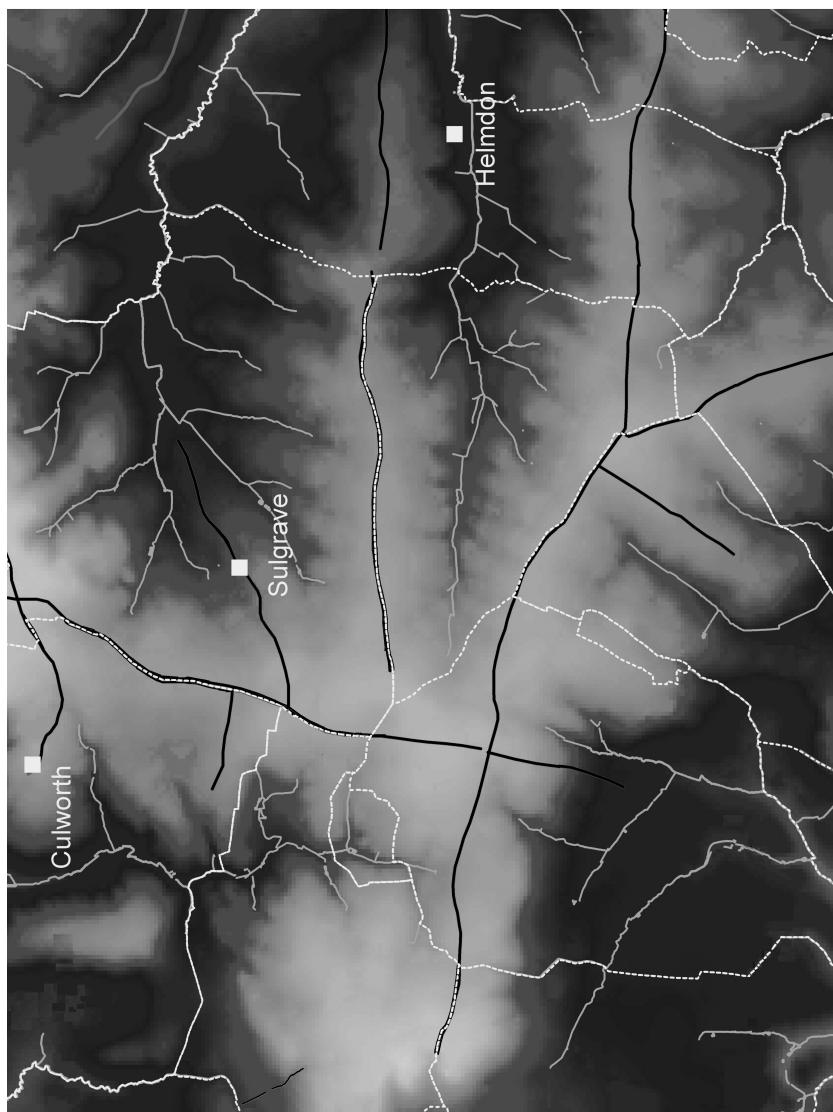
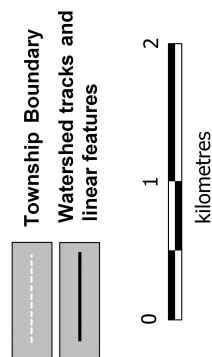
Northamptonshire is typical champion countryside, a county of extensive open fields and strongly nucleated villages, and while some of its road pattern was redrawn when enclosure occurred in the post-medieval period for the most part even parliamentary enclosure commissioners merely tidied up the existing network of rights of way. Systematic mapping of the archaeological traces of medieval cultivation in the county has allowed the entire layout of the open fields to be reconstructed with some confidence, including *lacunae* corresponding with areas of pasture and meadow and – in narrow and linear form – with roads and lanes.<sup>17</sup> Amongst the most continuous and prominent of the latter are a distinctive group of watershed routes which the boundaries of townships – most of which were probably fixed by the eleventh century – follow in the discontinuous manner just described, clearly indicating that the roads are earlier. The majority of these routes survive as distinctive features of the landscape today, still in most cases serving as roads. They are particularly prominent in the south-west of the county, where the topography is deeply incised by the tributaries of the Rivers Cherwell, Ouse, Nene and Tove, so that the watersheds between form a complex but well-defined pattern (Figure 12). In the centre of the county they also occur, although here the topography is simpler, and dominated by the high watersheds dividing the two arms of the Nene, and the Ise. Of particular note is the continuous line of road and township boundary running for nearly 13 kilometres from Harrington to Sywell Wood (SP 78907790 – SP 82606940).

While many examples of watershed tracks in this county thus remain as roads, some have disappeared, and of these a few survive as crop marks. The most important example is in the south-west of the county, where the

<sup>16</sup> R. Hippisley Cox, *The Green Roads of England* (London, 1914).

<sup>17</sup> T. Williamson, R. Liddiard and T. Partida, *Champion. The Making and Unmaking of the English Midland Landscape* (Exeter, 2012).





**Figure 12.** Watershed tracks and similar linear features, and the boundaries of medieval townships, in south west Northamptonshire. The relationship between the two leaves little doubt that the watershed lines predate the formation of townships in the later Saxon period.



**Figure 13.** Watershed tracks and 'co-axial' field patterns on the Chiltern dipslope in west Hertfordshire. The landscape forms a wide plateau, dissected by the valleys of the rivers Gade, Chess, Colne, Bulbourne and Ver. The watershed track to the left (west) runs from Chandlers Cross in the south to Bovington in the north; that to the right (east) from Leavesden Green in the south to Cupids Green. It may originally have linked up with the stretch of trackway further to the north, at Gaddesden Row. 'Co-axial' landscapes, displaying varying degrees of regularity, run up from the river floodplains to join the watershed tracks. Source: First Edition Ordnance Survey 6" maps, 1880s.

boundary between the townships of Steane and Hinton-in-the-Hedges, running from north to south along the watershed between the Cherwell and the Ouse, clearly follows the crop mark of a road or linear earthwork (from SP 54662377 to SP 54373653). The township boundary ends abruptly where it butts up against the east–west boundary of Newbottle. The linear crop mark, however, continues straight on, running south for a further 1.3 kilometres. It then appears to run into a contemporary settlement, undated but of typical late-prehistoric type (at SP 53933530).<sup>18</sup> This raises the possibility that some of these watershed features may not be of Saxon date, but instead have late-prehistoric or Roman origins.

Similar features occur throughout England, wherever the topography presents a reasonably clear contrast between valley and watershed. In west Hertfordshire for example long lanes run along the clay-covered watersheds between the valleys dissecting the dipslope of the Chiltern Hills, roughly at right angles to the escarpment. Two prominent examples can be found to the east and west of the Gade valley in the area to the north of Watford (Figure 13).<sup>19</sup> That to the west follows closely the line of the watershed between the Rivers Gade and Chess. It begins as a minor road near the county boundary with Buckinghamshire at Bovington (TQ012040), runs through that village (close to the parish church) and continues through the hamlet of Bulstrode. It then forms the north-eastern edge of Chipperfield Common (TQ045013), passing close to the sites of two prominent round barrows, and continues through Bucks Hill until it peters out around Chandlers Cross, as the watershed itself comes to an end as the lower ground around the confluence of the Gade and the Chess is reached. That to the east marks the watershed between the Gade and the Ver. Starting this time from the south, it runs from Leavesden Green (TQ102008), northwards through Abbots Langley village, and on through Bedmond, Pimlico, Leverstock Green and Adeyfield, to Cupid Green (TQ078094). Here it ends, but it is possible that it originally linked up with the long, straight section of road along which the hamlet of Gaddesden Row is strung, some 2 kilometres to the north. Neither of these prominent lines in the landscape, its should be noted, is followed for much of its length by township or parish boundaries, in part perhaps because of the large size of townships and parishes in this part of the Chilterns.

These watershed lines are hard to interpret. Most today take the form of roads, and many were evidently roads or tracks in the Middle Ages: the boundary clause of the 944 charter for Badby describes one prominent Northamptonshire example as a 'ridge way'.<sup>20</sup> The closest analogy, however, is perhaps with the linear boundary systems of the Yorkshire Wolds, which developed during the later-prehistoric and Roman periods. These follow, for the most part, major watersheds; appear to have served as both boundaries

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> Williamson, *Origins of Hertfordshire*, pp. 182–9.

<sup>20</sup> A. E. Brown, M. Gelling and C. Orr, 'The Details of the Anglo-Saxon Landscape of Badby Revisited', *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, 8 (1991), pp. 95–103.

and as trackways; and, in some cases, are still followed by modern roads.<sup>21</sup> Assuming that the uplands through which such features run constituted areas of woodland and grazing it seems likely that most marked divisions of these resources between communities based in neighbouring valleys. Such duality of function is not as perplexing as might at first appear: a boundary between two social groups and crossing the land of neither would make a particularly appropriate routeway, a neutral space through which a traveller might safely pass on these remote uplands. It may not be entirely coincidental that one of the late-seventh-century laws of Ine of Wessex laid down that 'If a man from a distance or a foreigner goes through the woods off the track, and does not shout nor blow his horn, he is to be assumed to be a thief, to be either redeemed or killed'.<sup>22</sup>

It is arguable, of course, that the roads came first, the boundaries following them later, and that they ran along watersheds simply because level ridgetops provided a more convenient route than the sloping ground to either side. In many cases, however, as with the Chiltern examples just described, the interfluves in question form wide, level plateaux, only minimally dissected by minor valleys. A choice of routes was thus available: the ones selected follow the watersheds closely even though the rivers whose catchments they divide, and even the valleys within which these flow, are not actually visible from the lines in question. In some cases, moreover, the road (or other linear feature) follows extraordinarily close to the precise line of the watershed, almost as if, when it was first set out, legitimacy was provided by close adherence to the dictates of topography, something which again speaks of boundaries, rather than rights of way. Above all, the fact that very similar linear features occur in many parts of the country which do *not* serve as roads, but only as boundaries, may suggest that the majority of such features originated as, and principally served the purpose of, the latter.

This said, not all such features are necessarily of the same antiquity. Some may be of prehistoric or Roman origin but the majority are probably later, although clearly in most cases predating the development of townships and parishes in the later Saxon period. They also clearly bounded units of very differing scale. Accepting that social territories were closely related to the patterns of the natural topography, this could hardly be otherwise, and we might usefully think of a loose conceptual hierarchy of drainage systems, related to a social and economic hierarchy, with the major topographic territories described in the previous chapter comprising major cultural zones, large valleys and major catchments representing the land of communities equivalent to the 'small shire' or *regio*, and minor valleys the home of some subsection of the latter. Land quality needs to be factored into this equation, however, for territories in the more marginal districts, at all levels of the hierarchy, might be larger than those in fertile areas. Fleming has reconstructed

<sup>21</sup> C. Stoertz, *Ancient Landscapes of the Yorkshire Wolds: Aerial Photographic Transcription and Analysis* (Swindon, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 366.

the early Anglian polity of *Swar*, in upper Swaledale, which extended over some 20,000 hectares, 'much of it moorland. The boundary followed the Swale watershed'.<sup>23</sup>

### *Co-axial landscapes and resource linkage*

Watershed tracks and boundaries are interesting and rather neglected features of the English landscape. More intensively studied, and arguably more closely related to the kinds of territorial patterns discussed in this chapter, are the so-called 'co-axial field systems', which have been identified in a number of areas of England. This term was originally coined in the 1970s – by the archaeologist Andrew Fleming – to describe a kind of planned prehistoric field system found, in its most extensive form, on Dartmoor (the 'parallel reave systems', which are of Bronze Age date).<sup>24</sup> Such systems have a dominant 'grain' – that is, they have axes running for a longer distance in one direction than another, so that they resemble in plan rather wavy and irregular brickwork. What is important in the present context is that broadly similar arrangements of boundaries, often extending over many hundreds of hectares, survive in a number of places in England (or survived until recently) not as crop marks or as tumbled stone walls, but as hedged fields, while other examples can be discerned in furlong patterns shown on early pre-enclosure maps (Figures 13, 14 and 15). The possibility that these, too, were the remains of ancient planned landscapes was raised by the suggestion – likewise made in the 1970s – that prehistoric and Roman patterns of land division may have survived on a large scale, in certain areas of England, into the Middle Ages and beyond.

Such arguments were first formulated by Warwick Rodwell and Paul Drury, who noted that in some parts of the anciently enclosed county of Essex patterns of fields could be found which, because they shared a common orientation across extensive areas, appeared to have been planned. These often covered an area significantly larger than the villas or manors of the Middle Ages, implying that they had been laid out in some earlier period, probably the Roman or later Iron Age. They also noted the fact that in a number of places in the same county, most notably at Little Waltham, early Roman military roads appear to slice through the field pattern in a way analogous to a railway line or bypass, leaving awkward corners, in such a manner as to suggest that the fields were earlier, and thus of prehistoric date.<sup>25</sup> Neither of these researchers employed the term 'co-axial', although

<sup>23</sup> A. Fleming, 'Swadal, Swar (and Erchwydd?): Early Medieval Polities in Upper Swaledale', *Landscape History* 16 (1994), pp. 17–30, at p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> A. Fleming, 'The Prehistoric Landscape of Dartmoor: Part 1, South Dartmoor', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 44 (1978), pp. 97–123.

<sup>25</sup> W. Rodwell, 'Relict Landscapes in Essex', in H. C. Bowen and P. J. Fowler (eds.), *Early Land Allotment* (London, 1978), pp. 89–98; P. Drury and W. Rodwell, 'Settlement in the Later Iron Age and Roman Periods', in D. G. Buckley (ed.), *The Archaeology of Essex to AD 1500* (London, 1980), pp. 59–75.



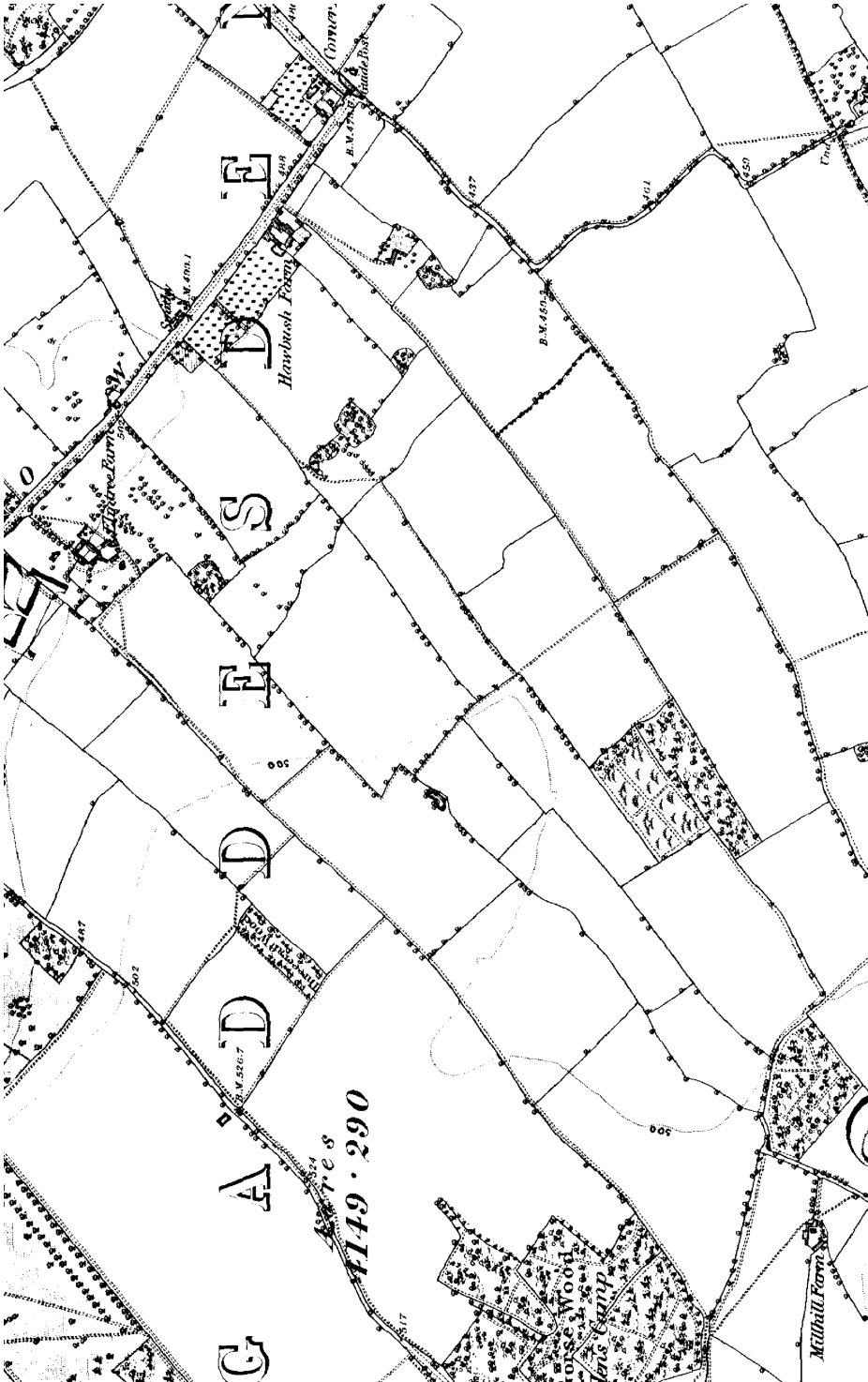
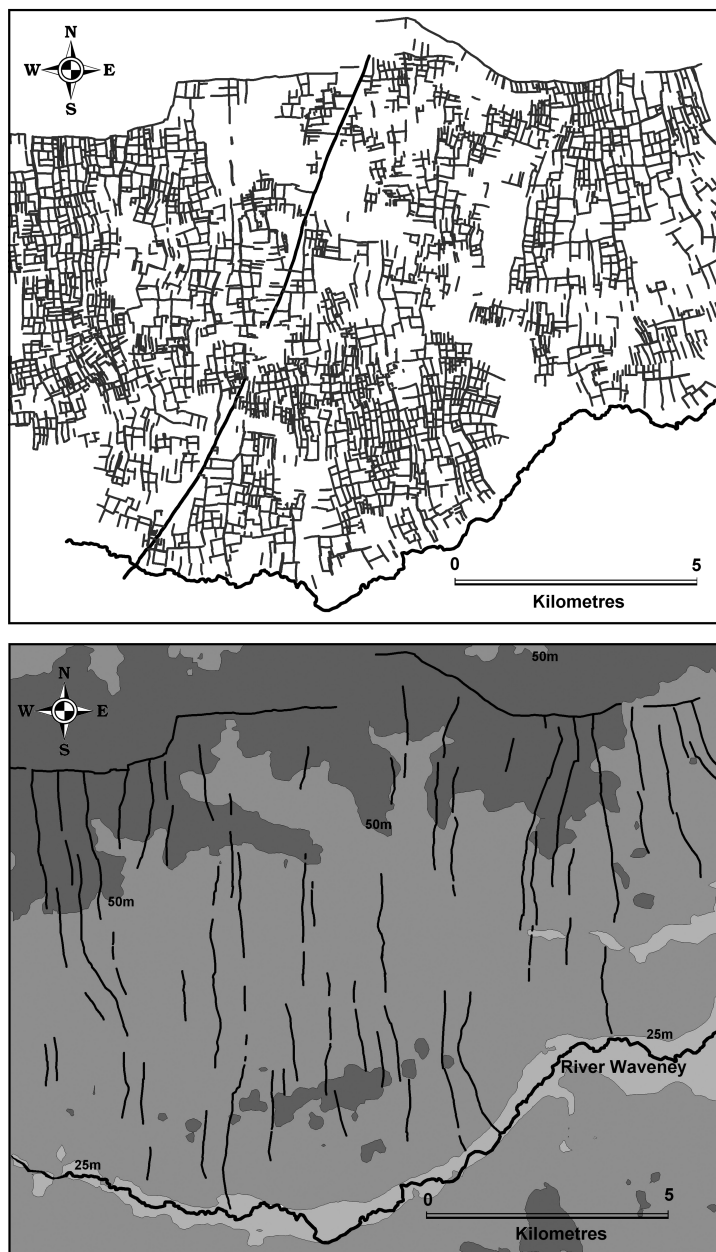


Figure 14. Part of the co-axial field pattern at Gaddesden Row, west Hertfordshire, as shown on the First Edition Ordnance Survey 6" map





**Figure 15.** Above: the so-called 'Scole-Dickleburgh Field System', a co-axial landscape lying to the north of the Waveney valley in south Norfolk, apparently 'slighted' by the Roman military road, the Pye Road. Based on a wide range of archive maps (see T. Williamson, 'Early Co-Axial Field Systems on the East Anglian Boulder Clays'). Below: the principal axes of the 'system' are mainly formed by a network of lanes or former lanes running at right angles to the topography – 'resource-linkage' routes which could as easily post-date, as pre-date, the Roman road.

many of their 'planned' field systems, such as those around Thurrock on the Thames gravels, clearly take this form. But most examples of such relict landscapes which have since been identified have been described in this way. They are particularly prominent in parts of Norfolk and Suffolk;<sup>26</sup> in western and in south-eastern Cambridgeshire;<sup>27</sup> on the dipslope of the Chiltern Hills in Hertfordshire;<sup>28</sup> on the London clay uplands in the south-east of that county;<sup>29</sup> and in the Arrow valley of Shropshire, around Hergest and Lyonshall.<sup>30</sup> Field patterns of this kind are now recognised as a distinct type in many of the county-based 'historic landscape categorisation' projects funded by English Heritage.<sup>31</sup> Some examples, although by no means all, appear to be dated by their relationship with Roman military roads, which seem to crash through them in the manner just described (Figure 15a). More generally, their antiquity is confirmed by the fact that they normally extend over several parishes and townships, the boundaries of which join, leave, and rejoin their principal axes in the manner already discussed in relation to watershed tracks and boundaries, suggesting that their basic framework at least was in place by the late Saxon period.

The idea that these often vast co-axial landscapes (covering over 50 square kilometres in the case of that around Scole in south Norfolk) are indeed survivals from the prehistoric period has come in for extensive criticism, partly on grounds of inherent implausibility and partly on the grounds that there are problems with too simplistic an approach to dating by horizontal stratigraphy, that is, by their apparent relationship with Roman roads.<sup>32</sup> Against this, it is perhaps worth pointing out that the well-documented Dartmoor reaves themselves continue in places onto lower, cultivated ground, in the form of modern field boundaries.<sup>33</sup> On the eastern edge of the moor, around Kestor and in the Bittaford–Ivybridge area, 'most of the evidence'

<sup>26</sup> T. Williamson, 'Early Coaxial Field Systems on the East Anglian Boulder Clays', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 53 (1987), pp. 419–31; T. Williamson, 'The "Scole–Dickleburgh Field System" Revisited', *Landscape History* 20 (1998), pp. 19–28; A. Davison, 'The Evolution of Settlement in Three Parishes in South East Norfolk', *East Anglian Archaeology* 49 (1990), pp. 73–4; M. Hesse, 'Fields, Tracks and Boundaries in the Creakes, South Norfolk', *Norfolk Archaeology* 41 (1992), pp. 305–24.

<sup>27</sup> S. Oosthuizen, 'Prehistoric Fields into Medieval Furlongs? Evidence from Caxton, South Cambridgeshire', *Proceedings of the Cambridgeshire Antiquarian Society* 86 (1998), pp. 145–52; S. Oosthuizen, 'The Roots of Common Fields: Linking Prehistoric and Medieval Field Systems in West Cambridgeshire', *Landscapes* 4 (2003), pp. 40–64; S. Harrison, 'Open Fields and Earlier Landscapes: Six Parishes in South-East Cambridgeshire', *Landscapes* 3 (2002), pp. 35–54.

<sup>28</sup> Williamson, *Origins of Hertfordshire*, pp. 182–90.

<sup>29</sup> S. Bryant, B. Perry and T. Williamson, 'A "Relict Landscape" in South-East Hertfordshire: Archaeological and Topographic Investigations in the Wormley Area', *Landscape History* 27 (2005), pp. 5–15.

<sup>30</sup> P. White, *The Arrow Valley, Herefordshire: Archaeology, Landscape Change and Conservation* (Hereford, 2003), pp. 37–47 and 73–5.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, L. Dyson-Bruce, S. Bryant, and I. Thompson, *Historic Landscape Character: County Report for Hertfordshire* (Hertford, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> D. Hinton, 'The "Scole–Dickleburgh Field System" Examined', *Landscape History* 19 (1997), pp. 5–13; E. Martin, 'Suffolk in the Iron Age', in J. Davies and T. Williamson (eds.), *Land of the Iceni: The Iron Age in Northern East Anglia* (Norwich, 1999), pp. 44–99: 52–8.

<sup>33</sup> A. Fleming, *The Dartmoor Reaves* (London, 1988), p. 30.

for the reave systems 'comes from the regular orientation of modern field boundaries'.<sup>34</sup> There is thus nothing inherently implausible about the suggestion that large-scale systems of prehistoric land division might survive within the modern landscape. There are also striking similarities in the relationships that many of the accepted co-axial field systems, and many of these putative relict landscapes, exhibit with regard to natural landforms. The layout of the major axes of the Dartmoor reaves is thus related to the broad sweeps of topography, in the sense that they run from the lower ground up onto the high interior of the moor. Yet at the same time they tend to ignore subsidiary, local features of the topography, even quite major obstacles like the Dart Gorge: in Fleming's elegant phrase, they are 'terrain oblivious'. The 'relict' co-axial landscapes display similar tendencies, although – found mainly in the more subdued terrain of lowland England – their obliviousness to minor topographic features takes a less dramatic form. All this said, however, there are a number of key differences between the unquestionably prehistoric examples of co-axial fields, and the examples allegedly surviving as relict landscapes. The morphological similarities between the two, that is, have been exaggerated.

The most important difference is that a high proportion, although apparently not all, of the major linear axes in 'relict' systems consist of roads or tracks, features which do not for the most part feature prominently, in archaeologically recognisable form, in the accepted prehistoric examples. It is possible that this distinction is more apparent than real, and that the roads developed at a later date, running alongside substantial linear boundaries which could not easily be crossed (some published examples of relict systems feature roads which kink slightly in places, as if being deflected a few metres where crossing from one side to another of a ditch, fence, bank or hedge). It is interesting that the Dartmoor reaves, where they survive as tumbled walls on the open moor, do not feature roads; but where 'ghosted' by modern boundaries on lower ground they often do so on their major axes. This said, in most 'relict' co-axials roads run for long distances and appear to be integral, original elements.

The fact that long tracks are a major articulating feature of these 'relict' landscapes not only serves to distinguish them from those surviving entirely in redundant archaeological forms. It is also an important clue to their true character and origins, especially when considered alongside their topographic contexts. Many examples of such landscapes are found where a river valley, following a relatively straight course, cuts through particularly extensive tracts of clay upland – in situations, that is, where the distance to the next valley is upwards of c. 6 kilometres. The main axes of the systems run from near the valley floor, at right angles to the river, up on to the plateaux above. The Scole–Dickleburgh system in south Norfolk, for example (Figure 15a), runs up and out of the valley of the River Waveney, onto the slightly undulating boulder-clay plateau to the north: the co-axial pattern around Wormley and

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 28–9.

Broxbourne in Hertfordshire lies at right angles to the River Lea, running westward, up the side of the valley and onto the heavy soils of the Beccles 3 and Windsor Associations, formed in drift and London clay, above. The parallel patterns of sinuous lanes and boundaries meticulously plotted by Sue Oosthuizen in the Bourn valley in west Cambridgeshire similarly run from the valley floor, to clay-covered interfluves.<sup>35</sup> Other examples are found on prominent escarpments, as in south-east Cambridgeshire, always orientated at right angles to the main direction of slope and, ignoring minor re-entrant valleys, continuing up onto a clay plateau above. A few run at right angles to coasts, again up onto higher ground, as in north Norfolk, although here the 'uplands' are occupied by acid sands rather than, as is usually the case with these landscapes, by heavy clays.

It is striking that the medieval parishes found in these same kinds of context are often laid out in the form of long, parallel strips. Published examples of co-axial field patterns frequently extend over one or more parishes of this type, similarly orientated, as in north-west and south Norfolk, in south-east Hertfordshire or south-east Cambridgeshire.<sup>36</sup> As many writers have observed, 'strip' parishes generally developed where natural resources are arranged as a series of parallel bands. The parishes lie at right angles to these, running for example from valley meadows, across a chalk escarpment, and up to a drift-covered plateau.<sup>37</sup> Presumably the Saxon estates from which these ecclesiastical units developed had likewise been so ordered, to ensure that they had access to a range of resources (where parishes were large and the medieval population sparse we do not find such a clear strip-like pattern: this only happened where parishes, and the estates which preceded them, were closely packed in such an environmental context).

This similarity of distribution does not of course mean that co-axial landscapes were contemporary with the strip parishes, or with their secular predecessors. Sarah Harrison has clearly shown that in south Cambridgeshire the parishes were unquestionably imposed upon an earlier arrangement of co-axial features: their boundaries as usual follow for a while, leave and then rejoin prominent elements.<sup>38</sup> Nor does it mean that the two forms of land division have precisely the same cause, although they clearly represent a response to the same broad environmental circumstances – banded resources. The south Cambridgeshire co-axials, for example, run for as much as 10 kilometres from the edge of the peat Fens, up the chalk escarpment of the East Anglian Heights, and onto the boulder-clay plateau above, which is still heavily wooded land.<sup>39</sup> Those in west Norfolk begin at the coastal marshes, cross well-drained and moderately fertile land, and then run up onto areas which in post-medieval times were mainly occupied by heaths but which,

<sup>35</sup> S. Oosthuizen, *Landscapes Decoded: The Origins and Development of Cambridgeshire's Medieval Fields* (Hatfield, 2006), pp. 68–90; especially pp. 70–1.

<sup>36</sup> Harrison, 'Open Fields and Earlier Landscapes'; Williamson, *Origins of Hertfordshire*, pp. 188–9.

<sup>37</sup> Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, p. 20.

<sup>38</sup> Harrison, 'Open Fields and Earlier Landscapes'.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40–1.

to judge from place-names, in early Saxon times included at least some woodland. Most co-axial field systems, however, begin on a valley floodplain, run up the well-drained slopes of the valley side, and then continue out onto wide and presumably once wooded clay-covered uplands.

Three further observations can usefully be made regarding these 'relict landscapes'. The first is that many have a hard edge, beyond which we find fields arranged in less regular patterns (and often including pockets of common land enclosed at a relatively recent date) or else another co-axial system, running up from a neighbouring valley. In the latter case, the division between the two is usually formed by one of the watershed routes already described and discussed, as on the Chiltern dip slope in west Hertfordshire (Figure 13). Such routes are not always associated with co-axial landscapes, but where they are they appear to form part of the same general system of land division. The second important point is that, as Peter Warner astutely observed many years ago, students of co-axial landscapes tend to focus on the most regular examples, and ignore the way that these contain, or can fade imperceptibly into, areas of more irregular fields, the boundaries of which can nevertheless display a degree of rough parallelism.<sup>40</sup> These latter areas are usually found where the terrain becomes more complex, interrupted by major tributary watercourses running at an angle to the main valley. The third and perhaps most important observation, however, is that when co-axial landscapes include (as they sometimes do) substantial areas of ancient woodland, these may simply fit into the pattern as large, but internally undivided, blocks; or they may, if more extensive (as most notably in the case of the Wormley–Broxbourne system), contain some of the main longitudinal axes of the co-axial landscape, and some lateral divisions, in earthwork form, but never a very tight mesh of relict boundaries.<sup>41</sup> In other words, the areas so defined by banks and hollow ways within the woods are significantly larger than the fields conforming to the co-axial pattern lying outside them. This suggests that, at least on the higher and heavier ground where the woods are generally located, the present co-axial field system is the consequence of the later infilling of what was originally a much sparser pattern of boundaries and, in particular, lanes.

This chapter and the previous one have both emphasised the contrast between the core areas of early territories, lying within the major valleys, and the outlying zones of woodland and pasture on the higher ground and heavier or less fertile soils. 'Relict' co-axial landscapes appear to have developed as a consequence of this enduring contrast between river and wold. The parallel tracks developed because there was a recurrent direction of movement between lower and higher ground, as wood and timber were brought from uplands down to valley settlements, and as livestock – including pigs – were repeatedly driven to the upland woods and pastures, and back again. Yet at the same time it is probable that these landscapes

<sup>40</sup> Warner, *Origins of Suffolk*, pp. 48–51.

<sup>41</sup> Bryant *et al.*, 'A "Relict Landscape" in South-East Hertfordshire', p. 14.



did not originate solely as networks of lanes. Portions of woodland may have been enclosed for specific purposes at an early date, accounting for some of the few prominent transverse elements. More importantly, some of the longitudinal elements do not appear to have ever functioned as tracks or lanes, but only as boundaries, and in this context attention should be drawn to the relationship of co-axial patterns with the watershed roads and boundaries discussed earlier in this chapter. These, as suggested, presumably represent ancient divisions of the upland woods and grazing grounds between groups living in the principal valleys. Some of the co-axial lines running up to them may thus have originated as further subdivisions among members of the communities living within a particular valley, laid out as population rose and closer definition of rights was required. Only in the course of the later Saxon period, as more intensive forms of land use were adopted, were these loose networks of lanes and boundaries gradually infilled with fields, the boundaries of which replicated the dominant 'grain' of the surrounding features. Co-axial landscapes are thus best understood as the footprint left by the extensive exploitation of large territories, within which a high proportion of the land area was occupied by woodland and pasture; and by the subsequent mode of their fragmentation, as population rose rapidly from the ninth century.<sup>42</sup>

While such an interpretation of these distinctive landscapes seems plausible, a number of key questions remain unresolved. Although the overall 'systems' clearly developed gradually and organically, there are nevertheless often areas within them which appear to have been laid out with care, to some predetermined scheme. These landscapes, that is, may contain some planned sections. Notable examples include the highly regular field pattern to the south-west of Gaddesden Row in Hertfordshire (Figure 14), and parts of the Wormley–Broxbourne landscape in the same county, especially the area between Beaumont Manor and Westfield Grove, where two principal axes maintain an almost precise separation of 275 metres for nearly 2 kilometres.<sup>43</sup> A more important issue concerns dating. Given the explanation for their evolution advanced above it is clear that these landscapes cannot be dated in any simple way by the manner in which they appear to be 'slighted' by Roman roads. The original relationship was not between the road, and a dense network of fields, but rather between the road and a widely spaced pattern of parallel lanes and boundaries. These could have been imposed on the Roman road just as easily as the other way around: the difference in orientation is explained by difference of purpose, the lanes and boundaries linking and dividing the resources of a local environment, the Roman road taking a direct route from one place of military or civilian importance to another. It need thus have no chronological implications (compare 15a and 15b). This said, there is some evidence of more conventional archaeological

<sup>42</sup> Whether such an interpretation could be applied to some of the co-axial field systems of prehistoric date remains unclear.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.



form which suggests a prehistoric or Roman date for some elements, or some examples, of such landscapes.

In north-west Norfolk, for example, excavations by Sarah Percival at Burnham Sutton in 1998 produced apparent evidence for the survival and continued development of a late-prehistoric co-axial field system through to the late Saxon period, and for the subsequent insertion within this of bundles of open-field strips.<sup>44</sup> An excavation within Cheshunt Park, more or less in the centre of the area occupied by the co-axial system around Broxbourne and Wormley in south-east Hertfordshire, revealed ditches conforming in orientation to the surrounding landscape which contained first- and second-century pottery, and which had apparently been filled in during the construction or expansion of a small Roman settlement.<sup>45</sup> More convincing evidence comes from the other side of Hertfordshire, just to the north of Watford. Excavations carried out at The Grove in 2000 – which involved the systematic stripping prior to development of around 4 hectares – revealed lost elements of the local co-axial field pattern (one of those shown in Figure 13), which had been removed when the landscape park was laid out here beside the River Gade in the 1760s. Several of these ditches contained, in their basal fills, sherds of unabraded Iron Age pottery: the line of one is directly continued, beyond the boundary of the park, as an upstanding boundary, the northern edge of Whippendell Wood.<sup>46</sup> Finally, in Shropshire, excavations were carried out in 2001 near Leen Farm in Pembridge within part of a co-axial field system in the Arrow valley, close to where it is apparently ‘slighted’ by the Rowe Ditch – a linear earthwork of presumed late Roman or early post-Roman date. Aerial photographs revealed a number of lost boundaries conforming to the orientation of the existing ones, and these when excavated were found to contain large quantities of Iron Age and Romano-British pottery. The excavators concluded that ‘perhaps the organisation of the field pattern today is derived from the organisation of the landscape nearly 2000 years ago’.<sup>47</sup>

Yet while such investigations suggest that these landscapes can contain very early elements, this does not mean that they developed in their entirety in remote prehistory. At Leen Farm the orientation of the archaeologically dated features, while close to, is nevertheless very slightly different from, that of the upstanding boundaries nearby; while Stephen Rippon’s careful re-examination of some of Rodwell and Drury’s Essex examples, based on limited excavation and a close examination of the crop marks appearing on aerial photographs, indicated that while some of their elements were potentially very early in date, others were not.<sup>48</sup> Additions and alterations appear to have been almost continuous over a long period of time. Moreover,

<sup>44</sup> S. Percival and T. Williamson, ‘Early Fields and Medieval Furlongs: Excavations at Creak Road, Burnham Sutton, Norfolk’, *Landscapes* 6 (2003), pp. 1–17.

<sup>45</sup> K. D. Ely and K. Edwards, ‘Cheshunt Park, Hertfordshire: An Archaeological Evaluation by the Time Team’, unpublished report (Bristol, 2003).

<sup>46</sup> Williamson, *Origins of Hertfordshire*, p. 188.

<sup>47</sup> White, *Arrow Valley*, p. 45.

<sup>48</sup> S. Rippon, ‘Early Planned Landscapes in South-East Essex’, *Essex Archaeology and History* 22 (1991), pp. 46–60.

we should remember that some evidence of continuity may in reality reflect the re-use of redundant features, as John Hunter suggested in the case of the main axes of some of the south Essex co-axials: 'During the post-Roman period of population decline and the contraction of land use, earlier field boundaries are likely to have survived under scrub and rough grazing', being re-employed at a later date as population re-expanded, it being easier to dig out an existing, silted ditch than to create one from scratch.<sup>49</sup> Even if some of their elements originated in the late-prehistoric period, in other words, co-axial field patterns are not the much-altered remains of vast planned landscapes of prehistoric date; indeed, in one sense they have no date at all. They developed organically, and represent many centuries of development, involving phases of expansion and abandonment, infilling and alteration, all structured by the extensive use of the landscape within particular topographic frameworks. This said, there seems little doubt that the majority of their principal elements were fixed in the course of the early and middle Saxon period, however much they owed to earlier centuries.

Co-axial landscapes are thus the etchings of Faith's 'small societies': but their clarity is largely a function of particular topographic contexts. The relatively regular, parallel spacing of their principal linear components reflects the fact that they occupy terrain which, while at times complex in its finer details, was essentially simple in its overall form. The main axes thus ran from base lines, formed by major river floodplains, coasts or springlines, which were straight or only gently curving, across relatively undissected terrain, onto wide and relatively level tablelands above. Where the natural topography was more complex and convoluted, such tidy and structured arrangements are absent. Nevertheless, where a dense and parallel mesh of 'resource linkage routes', to use Sarah Harrison's term,<sup>50</sup> is lacking, individual examples of such roads and tracks may exist, although they are less easy to identify. They can sometimes be recognised as routeways running from higher to lower ground, continuously for long distances, often avoiding the main centres of medieval settlement and seemingly related to some earlier phase of landscape development. Harrison described the pattern of rural roads around Lawshall in west Suffolk, where 'three or four routes approximately 10 kilometres in length run from heavy clays in the north to lighter soils in the Stour valley', apparently unaffected by the development of the great medieval city of Bury St Edmunds.<sup>51</sup> These and similar examples around Preston in the same county are 'only in the vaguest sense sub-parallel – they do not relate well to one another in terms of their spacing or exact course'.<sup>52</sup>

Elsewhere we have other variants. Where large tracts of difficult and remote wooded land existed, but the terrain was convoluted and incised in

<sup>49</sup> J. Hunter, *Field Systems in Essex* (Colchester, 2003), p. 35.

<sup>50</sup> S. Harrison, 'A History of Evolution and Interaction: Man, Roads and the Landscape to c. 1850', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of East Anglia 2005, pp. 159–80.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

character, networks of only loosely parallel roads developed, often with a more irregular infill of fields, such as those identified by Della Hooke running from the Felden areas of Warwickshire westwards, and deep into the heart of the wooded Arden.<sup>53</sup> In the High Weald a similar pattern of roughly parallel routeways developed, linking communities on the lighter soils to north and south with woods and grazing grounds as much as 20 kilometres away.<sup>54</sup> These were again separated by field patterns which were only very loosely co-axial in character, and sometimes irregular in layout. In places the subsequent division of the woods between manors led to the creation of idiosyncratic strip lands, their edges defined by these earlier droves. One, an outlier of the manor of Feering, thus formed a narrow band some 12 kilometres long but only a few hundred metres in width; another example, an outlier of the manor of West Tarring (near Worthing) at Marlpost, has a similarly attenuated form.<sup>55</sup>

The latter are examples of where early-medieval communities exploited areas of woodland and grazing lying well beyond the immediate confines of a local valley or river system. In practice the division between arable cores and woodland/pasture peripheries was thus infinitely more complex and variable than in Everitt's elegant model, something which is unsurprising given the character of England's geology and geomorphology. There were, for example, seasonal grazing grounds on coastal marshes, fully exploited by middle Saxon times, portions of which often remained attached in some way to places inland, and in some cases far inland, well into the Middle Ages. The Essex coastal marshes often formed detached portions of manors lying at a distance, while in Norfolk the parochial divisions of the Halvergate Marshes, a former estuary lying immediately inland from Great Yarmouth, are particularly complex, with some portions of the marsh forming part of adjacent 'upland' parishes, some comprising detached sections of such parishes, and others constituting detached portions of parishes lying – in the case of Postwick near Norwich – as much as 20 kilometres away.<sup>56</sup> The river and wold model, in other words, provides a useful way of thinking about the topographic context of early territorial organisation, as long as we remember its limitations.

## *Conclusion*

Faith's resource territories of 'small people', intimately related to the natural topography, thus seem to have left many marks on the modern landscape. Some of these, like the so-called co-axial field systems, have attracted the

<sup>53</sup> D. Hooke, 'The Woodland Landscape of Early Medieval England', in N. Higham and M. J. Ryan (eds.), *Place-Names, Language and the Anglo-Saxon Landscape* (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. 143–74, at pp. 152–3.

<sup>54</sup> D. Chatwin and M. F. Gardiner, 'Rethinking the Early Medieval Settlement of Woodlands: Evidence from the Western Sussex Weald', *Landscape History* 27 (2005), pp. 31–49.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40–1.

<sup>56</sup> A. Reeves and T. Williamson, 'Marshes', in J. Thirsk (ed.), *Rural England: An Illustrated History of the Landscape* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 150–66.

attention of researchers in the past but others – resource-linkage routes more generally, and watershed boundaries – have not. Numerous features in the present landscape appear to have their origins in forms of economic organisation in which, within large territories, land use was strongly concentrated on particular soil types, extensive areas were given over to grazing and woodland, and complex systems of trackways allowed the movement of stock and other commodities, often over very long distances. The dissolution of such systems of extensive economic exploitation can also be seen in the gradual formation – through the infilling of the spaces between parallel trackways – of the distinctive co-axial field patterns.

These landscapes thus inform us about changing forms of social and economic organisation in the course of the Saxon period. But they also raise challenging questions concerning chronology and continuity. While it is probable that the patterns and systems of extensive territorial organisation etched into the landscape are essentially of early/middle Saxon date some of their physical elements, as we have seen, may have prehistoric or Roman origins. This in turn hints, once again, at the long-term stability of 'small societies', from prehistoric through to later Saxon times, reinforcing the impression that the real break in forms of economic organisation, and in systems of resource exploitation and allocation, came with the demographic expansion of the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, when upland wolds were broken up into fields, often for the first time, within the framework of the trackways through which they had initially been exploited. But it also raises questions about how we can distinguish continuity from re-use, and also from replication – that is, the tendency for similar societies at different times to respond in similar ways to the same environmental influences and topographic frameworks.

The case of Braughing, briefly discussed earlier, seems a convincing enough example of long-term continuity: it is hard to believe that this did not persist as a central place for a valley-based territory from the Iron Age through to later Saxon times. But in Hertfordshire, as in Middlesex and Essex, there are many other places where what appear to have been early estate centres lie on or close to important Iron Age or Roman settlements. In Hertfordshire alone St Albans, Braughing, Welwyn and Berkhamsted – all major Saxon estate centres, all the sites of early minsters – lay on or immediately beside Roman towns and major Iron Age settlements. Bishop's Stortford, Wheathampstead, Hadham, Ashwell and Cheshunt also seem to have located at or near places of Roman and, in some cases, earlier importance.<sup>57</sup> It is easy to assume continuity, but the fact that social territories were often nested neatly within topographic units raises the possibility that these could be reconstituted in similar forms in successive periods, and that the location of their central places could likewise be re-established in the same general places, determined by such things as water supplies, or the existence of crossing points on rivers.

<sup>57</sup> Williamson, *Origins of Hertfordshire*, pp. 162–3.

Finally, examining landscapes within environmental and topographic contexts allows us to see some of the problems inherent in certain familiar and much-practised approaches in landscape studies, especially those which might be labelled 'landscape stratigraphy'. Figure 15a looks like an ancient planned field system 'slighted' by a Roman road. But like most published examples of the genre, it omits essential information concerning topography. When this is taken into consideration, and only the main axes – tracks or lanes for most or all of their length – are considered, the origins of this regular landscape as a pattern of resource-linkage tracks becomes clear (Figure 15b) and, at the same time, the problematic character of dating by horizontal stratigraphy becomes apparent: the Roman road could just as easily predate, as post-date, the pattern of parallel lanes. More than this: while the system appears to have been planned in its entirety, because of its regularity and coherence, we can see that this too is an illusion. Because we are accustomed to interpret regularity as evidence of planning, we often fail to explore the extent to which a more gradual mode of development, influenced by a particular set of environmental conditions in a specific social and economic context, could create very similar effects. Regularity and apparent coherence are not, in other words, necessary evidence for conscious and deliberate organisation and planning. This is an obvious but nevertheless important observation, to which we shall have cause to return at a later stage, and in rather different circumstances.

## The Gradient of Freedom

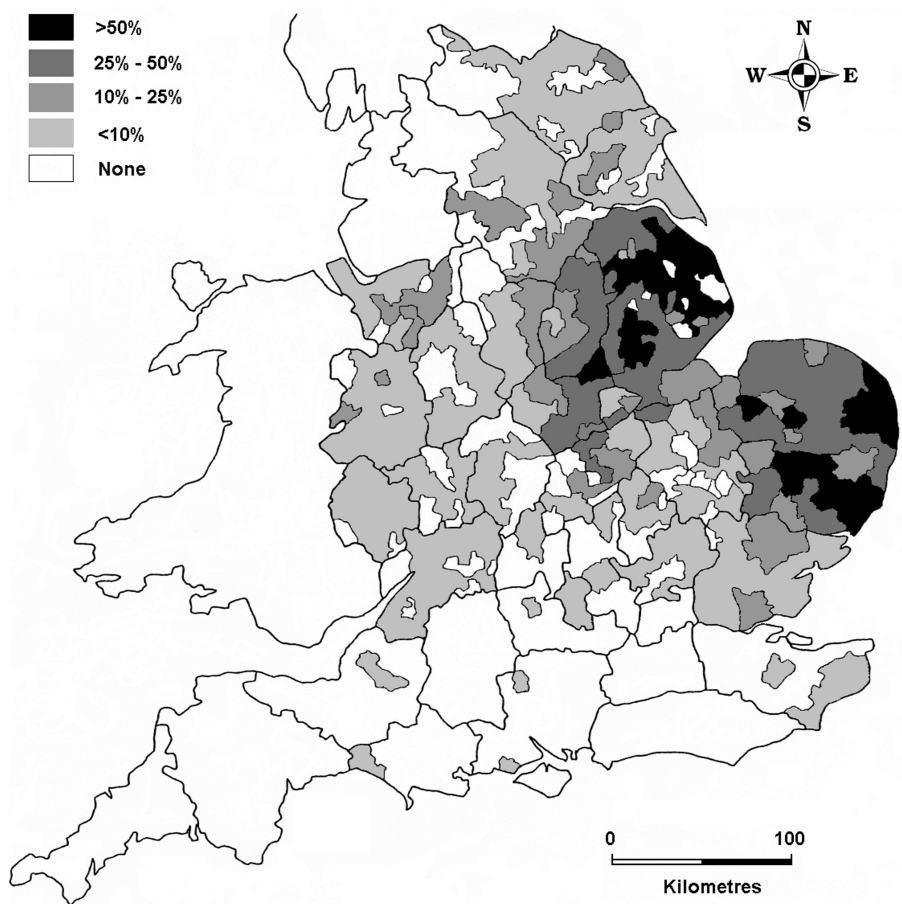
### *Introduction*

The previous two chapters argued that natural topography, in the sense of the configuration of landforms, was an important influence on the development of cultural identities and of economic territories in early England. But topography, and in particular the contrast in relief between the east and the west of the country, also had an effect on climate, and was thus the main influence on national variations in late Saxon population densities, as discussed in Chapter 2. The principal argument of this chapter is that climatic variations were, in addition, a major determinant of the long-term social development of different regions of England, especially in the later Saxon period, as large territories progressively fragmented into smaller manors and estates.

### *The free peasantry*

One of the most striking features of Domesday Book is the marked differences it seems to show between the social structure of eastern, and of western and southern, England. In a swathe of countryside running from north Essex through to north Lincolnshire, and extending west into Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire and Northamptonshire, a significant proportion of the population – ranging from 10 to over 70 per cent, depending on the area – were classed as sokemen (*sochemanni*) or free men (*liberi homines*) (Figure 16). While there is broad agreement amongst historians that the individuals so described enjoyed a more privileged status than the villeins, bordars and cottars who made up the majority of the peasant population, even in most of these eastern districts of England, uncertainties remain about the character of the differences between the two classes, in terms of the rights they possessed and the obligations that they owed. In very general terms, free men appear to have been small or medium-sized proprietors who effectively owned their own land. Sokeman, while they likewise possessed their own property, nevertheless owed to particular lords certain obligations and services attached to it, although in general, to judge from slightly later sources, these were not very onerous. But such neat definitions are perhaps misleading, and those responsible for compiling Domesday were certainly inconsistent in the way they treated such individuals.





**Figure 16.** Free men and sokemen as a proportion of the recorded Domesday population in 1086 (after H.C. Darby, *Domesday England*).

In Norfolk the two groups were present in roughly equal numbers and were, for the most part, scrupulously distinguished.<sup>1</sup> Sokemen are usually listed after the main chattels and resources of each manor, as a kind of appendix.<sup>2</sup> Their land is said to be 'at' so many acres or carucates, or they themselves are said to dwell 'in' or 'on' so many acres or carucates of the manor in question. The implication is that such individuals paid their taxes through the estate to which they were attached rather than directly on their own account, although there are other interpretations. Free men in contrast were often accorded an entry in their own right in the survey; are frequently

<sup>1</sup> There were 4,571 sokemen and 17 half-sokemen, 4,277 *liberi homines* and 63 half-freemen, together with 21 soke women, 117 free women, and eight half-free women.

<sup>2</sup> Williamson, *Origins of Norfolk*, pp. 96–102, 117–22.

described as 'holding' their land, implying that they paid their taxes directly; and their precise relationship with social superiors is often described in some detail. We read for example that certain individuals were subject to a local lord 'in commendation only', 'at jurisdiction (*soc*) and in commendation only', 'at fold-rights [that is, obliged to place their sheep in the lord's fold] and in commendation only'. This happens less often with sokemen. Their rights and duties were, by implication, ancient and traditional, whereas free men were a less well-defined group whose relationships with lords were voluntary and variable, although many had evidently 'commended' themselves to a powerful individual, owing him services and support in return for patronage and protection.

Such fine distinctions do not occur everywhere in Domesday. In Lincolnshire, for example, no *liberi homines* are listed: all members of the free peasantry are described as sokemen. It is unlikely that this reflects a radical difference in the composition of local society, and many of the individuals described as sokemen in Lincolnshire would almost certainly have been categorised as free men in Norfolk, although the difference may imply that individuals of this status were more numerous in Norfolk than in Lincolnshire, thus ensuring that the distinction was one worth making. In Suffolk both groups appear but with less consistent differences between them than in Norfolk, while other near-contemporary sources suggest that the terms might have been used loosely or interchangeably. For the holdings of the abbey of Bury St Edmunds we are thus able to compare the way that Domesday records these individuals with the way that they are treated in the *Feudal Book of Abbot Baldwin*, which was probably compiled only a little time earlier. In a large number of cases, where Domesday records free men the *Feudal Book* details sokemen.<sup>3</sup>

There were many other variations in the ways in which the 'free peasantry' are treated in different counties, and these not only make it difficult to compare, across the country as a whole, the precise composition of the free peasantry. They also raise the possibility that in some parts of the country individuals of similar status may have been treated in some other way altogether, perhaps being classified as villeins. It is noticeable for example that while moderate numbers of sokemen are recorded in Essex and Hertfordshire only twenty-six are recorded in Middlesex in 1066, and none at all in 1086. But a number of villeins holdings huge farms, covering a hide or in some cases two, are listed, and it is possible that these would have been accorded a different, higher social status in other counties.<sup>4</sup> The reduction in sokemen numbers in Middlesex between 1066 and 1086 is typical – this class did not fare well at the Conquest – and this raises a further problem. Figure 16, derived from the meticulous maps prepared by H. C. Darby in the 1970s, shows the distribution of free peasants in 1086. Ambiguities and

<sup>3</sup> R. G. Lennard, *Rural England, 1086–1135: A Study of Social and Agrarian Conditions* (London, 1959), p. 349.

<sup>4</sup> T. G. Pinder, 'Domesday Survey: Introduction', in J. S. Cockburn, H. P. F. King, and K. G. T. McDonnell (eds.), *Victoria County History of Middlesex*, vol. I (London 1969), pp. 80–118, at p. 92.

inconsistencies in Domesday make it impossible to provide a reliable map of the situation at the time of the Conquest, and the reduction in the numbers of sokemen in its wake was often considerable and apparently greater in some counties than in others. In Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire they declined from around 23 to 3 per cent and 18 to 3.6 per cent respectively of the recorded population. Lastly, we should note that the individuals classed as 'radmen', who were present in small numbers in Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, Herefordshire, Shropshire and Cheshire, and sporadically elsewhere, may have had a status similar to the free peasants of the east: one Domesday entry, for Deerhurst in Gloucestershire, describes some of the tenants as 'radmen, that is free men'. Figure 16, in other words, provides only a rough guide to the distribution of landholders of free status at the end of the Saxon period, although it is unlikely to mislead to any serious extent. All in all, there seems little doubt that free peasants were principally a feature of the east, and especially of Norfolk, Suffolk and Lincolnshire, declining gradually in importance towards the south and west.

The dominance of free men and sokemen in the eastern counties has often been explained as the consequence of the Viking invasions of the ninth century.<sup>5</sup> In Stenton's words, it was no accident that 'a social organisation to which there is no parallel elsewhere in England occurs in the one part of the country in which the regular development of native institutions had been interrupted by a foreign settlement'.<sup>6</sup> One suggested connection is that the free men and sokemen of Domesday were the lineal descendants of de-mobbed Viking armies, or of Scandinavian peasants who migrated in the immediate wake of conquest;<sup>7</sup> another is that the disruptions brought about by Viking raiding and conquest during the ninth century somehow allowed the inhabitants of this area to escape the increasing oppression suffered by their fellows in districts which remained under Saxon control, preserving the 'social conditions of an earlier age from such transformations as appeared elsewhere'.<sup>8</sup> Yet there is very little evidence that early-medieval social and tenurial patterns, and Viking settlement, were in fact causally connected, and there is no real reason to assume that the Danes were, by definition, lovers of freedom in a way that the English were not. In addition, there is often a measure of circularity in the arguments of those who believe that large-scale Danish settlement was a major factor in the social and tenurial development of eastern England, while at the same time interpreting the distribution of free peasants as part of the evidence for the scale of that settlement. While there are certainly dangers in minimising the magnitude of Scandinavian immigration and influence,<sup>9</sup> it is difficult to see the social and tenurial peculiarities of eastern England simply as their consequence. Moreover,

<sup>5</sup> Davis, 'East Anglia and the Danelaw', p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 519.

<sup>7</sup> Stenton, 'The Historical Bearing of Place-Name Studies'.

<sup>8</sup> Lennard, *Rural England*, p. 395.

<sup>9</sup> D. Hadley, '"And They Proceeded to Plough and to Support Themselves": the Scandinavian Settlement of England', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 19 (1996), pp. 69–96.

the distribution of free peasants clearly spills out beyond the boundaries of the North Sea Province, the region of England which I have suggested was most affected by Scandinavian influence (and settlement), although most of the main concentrations are admittedly constrained within them. Sokemen, and to a lesser extent free men, are thus recorded, especially in 1066, in modest numbers across much of Essex and eastern Hertfordshire and more sporadically well to the south and west of any of the suggested boundaries of the Danelaw, in Middlesex, Surrey and southern Buckinghamshire. There are thus considerable problems in explaining the distribution of Domesday's free peasants simply in terms of Scandinavian settlement or influence, even without the added complications arguably presented by the wider penumbra of privileged villeins found in places like Kent.

*Soc*, it should be emphasised, was an English word as much as a Danish one, which should in itself immediately alert us to the possibility that sokemen may have been an indigenous rather than an intrusive group. *Soc* refers to one of the three bonds by which one man might be dependent upon, or subservient to, another in later Anglo-Saxon society, the others being the personal bond of commendation and a tenurial bond – that is, where a man occupied land owned by somebody else in return for services or other dues.<sup>10</sup> In Baxter's words, 'Soke rights evolved from early royal support systems: they are a relic of an age of "extensive lordship" when the dominant mode of surplus extraction was the collection of renders and dues from large land units, centred on royal and princely vill'.<sup>11</sup> Soke rights had gradually been alienated, in the manner described in Chapter 1, by the practice of 'booking' land, but they remained significant – whether paid to royal manors, or to estate centres now in the hands of others – at the time of Domesday. They included both jurisdictional rights, the owner profiting from the fines levied on sokemen in the royal courts, and customary dues, payments and services of various kinds. Sokemen were thus, in essence, the descendants of the free *ceorls* whom we meet in the early law codes. They were effectively owners of the land on which they dwelt but they were obliged to perform regular duties at important estate centres, including attendance at the courts there. These centres were sometimes still royal vills, but more often they had become the property of powerful individuals to whom royal demesne, and regalian rights, had been alienated.

As Hadley and others have described, in the northern Danelaw – Lincolnshire and adjacent counties – sokemen were routinely associated with a particular kind of territorial organisation. In her words, 'The region is characterised in Domesday Book by large estates or "sokes", which consisted of a central manor with outlying dependencies (known as berewicks and sokelands) which were not uncommonly many miles away from the manorial centre'.<sup>12</sup> Berewicks comprised, in effect, detached portions of

<sup>10</sup> F. W. Maitland, *Domesday Book and Beyond: Three Essays in the Early History of England* (Cambridge, 1921), p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> S. Baxter, *The Earls of Mercia* (Oxford, 2007), p. 210.

<sup>12</sup> Hadley, *The Northern Danelaw*, p. 108.

the manorial demesne: that is, the lord was the owner of the soil. But in a sokeland the land was owned by those who lived on it, although 'it also carried a liability to render services and dues at the manorial centre to which it was attached'. Some villas in the northern Danelaw consisted entirely of sokelands, or of sokelands and berewicks, often attached to different manors. But some – significantly, as we shall see – contained a mixture of sokelands and small manors without outlying dependencies. Hadley gives the example of Winterton in Lincolnshire, which in 1066 included four small manors; berewicks belonging to manors in the neighbouring townships of Whitton, Coleby, and Roxby; and sokelands belonging to Kirton in Lindsey, Scawby and Sturton – lying 14, 15 and 20 kilometres away respectively.<sup>13</sup>

Domesday does not tell us the precise nature of the customary dues owed by the sokemen of the north, but later sources can sometimes indicate their character. Baxter has discussed the case of Newark, which contained twenty-six dependent sokemen in 1086. A document dating to the late 1220s lists twenty-three sokemen and describes their obligations. Some of them owed suit at the court of the wapentake once a fortnight, and all owed a rent of 15d and half a hen for each bovat of land that they held. In addition, each year they were bound to build stalls at Newark fair (or pay 'haypenny' in lieu); provide fodder for a horse for one night; carry half a load of firewood (or make a payment in lieu); and provide fifteen days of agricultural work, ploughing, weeding, mowing, haymaking, threshing or shearing.<sup>14</sup> These were troublesome but not deeply onerous tasks. Indeed, the very fact that sokemen lived, in many cases, at some distance from the manor to which they were attached (or its berewicks) ensured that higher levels of service could not easily have been exacted from them. In some cases the connections between sokelands and manors – between sokemen and estate centre – were evidently ancient. But elsewhere, as Hadley suggests, the layout of sokes may well have been reconfigured in the course of the ninth or tenth centuries, as a consequence of the Danish incursions and the English reconquest.<sup>15</sup>

The Domesday account for Lincolnshire is particularly detailed, and for this reason we can see clearly the way in which sokemen often owed dues and services to an estate centre lying outside, and sometimes well outside, the township in which they dwelt. Elsewhere in the north-east Domesday sometimes only gives a rounded total for the population and resources of a manor, and fails to make it clear that some of these were located elsewhere. The same is even more true further south, in East Anglia. Indeed, at first sight we have a rather different set of territorial arrangements in this region, for in Norfolk and Suffolk Domesday never provides lists of outlying sokelands attached to a head manor, although sokemen themselves are often thick on the ground. But close examination of the text suggests the existence of very similar territorial arrangements to those found in the north.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>14</sup> Baxter, *Earls of Mercia*, pp. 259–61.

<sup>15</sup> Hadley, *The Northern Danelaw*, pp. 155–60.

The clearest evidence comes from Norfolk, where the majority of sokemen, and all the largest concentrations, are found on particular kinds of manor: large royal manors, manors to which hundreds were attached, places which no longer had such a role by 1066 but which had given their names to hundreds, and places which other evidence strongly suggests had once been of particular importance – that is, places which probably originated as royal villis, centres for the exaction of tribute, in middle Saxon times. As already noted, they are usually listed as a kind of appendix after the other resources of the manor in question and are described as dwelling ‘in’ or ‘on’ so many acres or carucates of its land.<sup>16</sup> The hundred of Forehoe in central Norfolk makes a useful case study. This included the massive (for Norfolk) parish of Wymondham, extending over some 4,243 acres (1,717 hectares), which at the time of Domesday comprised a single large manor with a recorded population of 350, including eight attached free men and no less than eighty-eight sokemen. In the post-Conquest period Wymondham was a half-hundred in its own right, separate from the rest of Forehoe. The hundred itself was attached to the royal manor of Hingham, some 9 kilometres to the west: the *soc* of the inhabitants of Deopham and Wicklewood lay there in 1066, and probably that of those in neighbouring villis. But there was a third major manorial centre within the hundred. An inquest in 1242 found that the manor of Costessey, in the north-east of the hundred, had the same liberties and exemptions as Wymondham and some of the local manorial lords paid suit to the court here, rather than to that of the hundred. The hundred of Forehoe, in other words, may have been constructed from three earlier territories. At the time of Domesday Costessey was held by one Gyrth and had outlying berewicks at Bawburgh and Honingham Thorpe. Small numbers of sokemen commended to him held land in Wramplingham, Barford and Marlingford, while others – in Runhall, Brandon Parva, Carleton Forehoe and Honingham – were valued in Costessey. Far larger numbers of sokemen – no less than forty-four – were listed under Costessey itself, Domesday informing us – as it usually does in Norfolk – that these individuals ‘lie in’ (*iacent*) the manor. Unusually, however, it adds the information that ‘The land of the sokemen . . . is Easton; and Honingham, which a certain one of these sokemen holds’, these places being separate villis, and later parishes, lying to the west of Costessey.<sup>17</sup> The sokemen listed in high numbers under manors elsewhere in Norfolk, such as Buckenham (seventy-one) or Blofield (forty-eight), were likewise almost certainly dwelling on sokelands often lying at some distance from the manorial focus. In other words, variations in the way that Domesday lays out its information from county to county tends to obscure the fact that throughout eastern England the same basic territorial arrangements could be found.

<sup>16</sup> Williamson, *Origins of Norfolk*, pp. 99–102.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96–9.



*Sokemen outside the east*

The distribution of recorded sokemen, like that of the free peasantry as a whole, is strongly concentrated in the eastern counties, and especially in Norfolk, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire. In many districts within these counties sokemen made up over 20 per cent of the population, and in parts of Lincolnshire – where no *liberi homines* were recorded, and where some individuals of this group were thus probably classed as sokemen – they constituted more than half. But to the south and west of these areas sokemen were also present, although in lower numbers, constituting in 1086, in any district, less than 10 per cent and usually less than 5 per cent of the recorded population: and while, as noted, in parts of Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire especially the figures before the Conquest would have been higher, sokemen were still clearly a less prominent feature of the population than in their eastern heartlands.

The area around Hitchin in Hertfordshire provides useful insights into the character of sokemen in areas in which they formed a modest proportion of the population.<sup>18</sup> By the time of Domesday the town had given its name to the half-hundred of Hitchin, suggesting that it had been a major royal manor when the hundredal system was established early in the previous century. In 1066 Hitchin was held by Earl Harold, but this may have been a recent alienation from the Crown, and by 1086 it was in the hands of King William. Incidental information attests the importance of the place, its role as a *villa regis*, at an earlier date. It was here that the noblewoman Æthelgifu defended her claims to the estates bequeathed to her by her husband against those of his kin at a great oath taken before many important and powerful figures (see p. 000).<sup>19</sup> Hitchin lies in the west of Hertfordshire, in that section of the county which, before the unification of England under the West Saxons, formed part of the kingdom of Mercia, and it appears to have been the site of an early *burh*, for the hamlet of Bearton Green a little to the north-west of the town takes its name from the Old English *Byrhtun*, ‘farm belonging to the *burh*’, while in 2004 a substantial ditch of middle Saxon date was excavated in the middle of the town, running roughly north-north-east to south-south-west in the area between Bucklersbury and Paynes Park, and another, less imposing, was discovered in 2003 during evaluation excavations on the west side of Biggin Lane.<sup>20</sup> Typically, there are signs that the region focused on Hitchin had an even longer history because one of the small tribal groups mentioned in the *Tribal Hidage*, the list of the tribute owed to a Mercian overlord which was probably drawn up in the 660s or 670s, are called the *Hicce*.<sup>21</sup> They were assessed at 300 hides, and

<sup>18</sup> I. Friel, ‘The Hicce: An Anglo-Saxon Tribe in the Hitchin area’, *Hertfordshire’s Past* 13 (1982), pp. 2–13; Williamson, *Origins of Hertfordshire*, pp. 119–25.

<sup>19</sup> Crick, *Charters of St Albans*, no. 7.

<sup>20</sup> J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Hertfordshire* (Cambridge, 1938), p. 9; Williamson, *Origins of Hertfordshire*, p. 84.

<sup>21</sup> D. Dumville, ‘Essex, Middle Anglia, and the Expansion of Mercia in the South-East Midlands’,

seem to have occupied a territory in northern Hertfordshire and southern Bedfordshire which certainly extended as far south as Langley in the former county, where Hitch Wood is 'the wood belonging to the *Hicce*'.<sup>22</sup> Domesday describes how the Bedfordshire vill of Westoning 'lay in' Hitchin Hundred, while the nearby vills of Poleshanger and Meppershall, while not explicitly described as lying there, were listed in the Hertfordshire rather than in the Bedfordshire section of the survey. Later documents show that detached portions of Shillington parish also lay in Hitchin Hundred. These connections could be ancient, dating back to the time before the creation of the boundary between Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire.<sup>23</sup> Æthelgifu's will of c. 970 includes a bequest to a minster community here and Domesday describes how two of the five hides at which the vill was assessed 'lie in the minster (*monasterium*) of this estate'.<sup>24</sup> Even without the explicit use of this term, this extraordinarily large glebe would have signalled the church's superior status. The name of Preston, a village which always remained a hamlet of Hitchin – 'the priests' *tun*' – suggests that this was originally the portion of the estate reserved for the sustenance of the minster priests. By 1291, when the *Taxatio Ecclesiastica* was drawn up, Hitchin had become the head of, and had given its name to, a rural deanery.<sup>25</sup>

A number of the surrounding vills were included within Hitchin Hundred: *Welei* or *Wilei*, which comprised a large part of the later parish of Preston; Pirton; Hexton; Westoning in Bedfordshire; *Flesmere* (Flexmore) and *Leglega* (now Ley Green), comprising the northern section of the parish of Kings Walden; Kings Walden itself; Charlton, now a hamlet within the parish of Hitchin; Dinsley, now Temple Dinsley in Preston; Lilley; Great and Little Offley; *Welle*, now represented by Wellbury House in Offley; Kimpton; Stagenhoe; and Wandon and Bendish, now hamlets in Kings Walden and St Pauls Walden respectively (Figure 17). Domesday also describes a group of manors in the surrounding area as 'lying in' Hitchin, or as having been 'attached to' or 'placed in' that manor. These include many, but not all, of the places in Hitchin Hundred (Pirton, Bendish, Lilley, *Leglega*, Stagenhoe, Flexmore, and Kimpton were excluded) together with Wymondley and Minsden in the adjacent hundred of Broadwater. Some of these places had, according to Domesday, only become attached to Hitchin since the Conquest – Walden, Dinsley, Offley, *Welle*, and *Willei*. But most already 'lay' there under Harold – they were manors held by him, and administered from Hitchin. Hexton and Wymondeley had only been associated with Hitchin by Harold himself, but others were probably anciently connected.

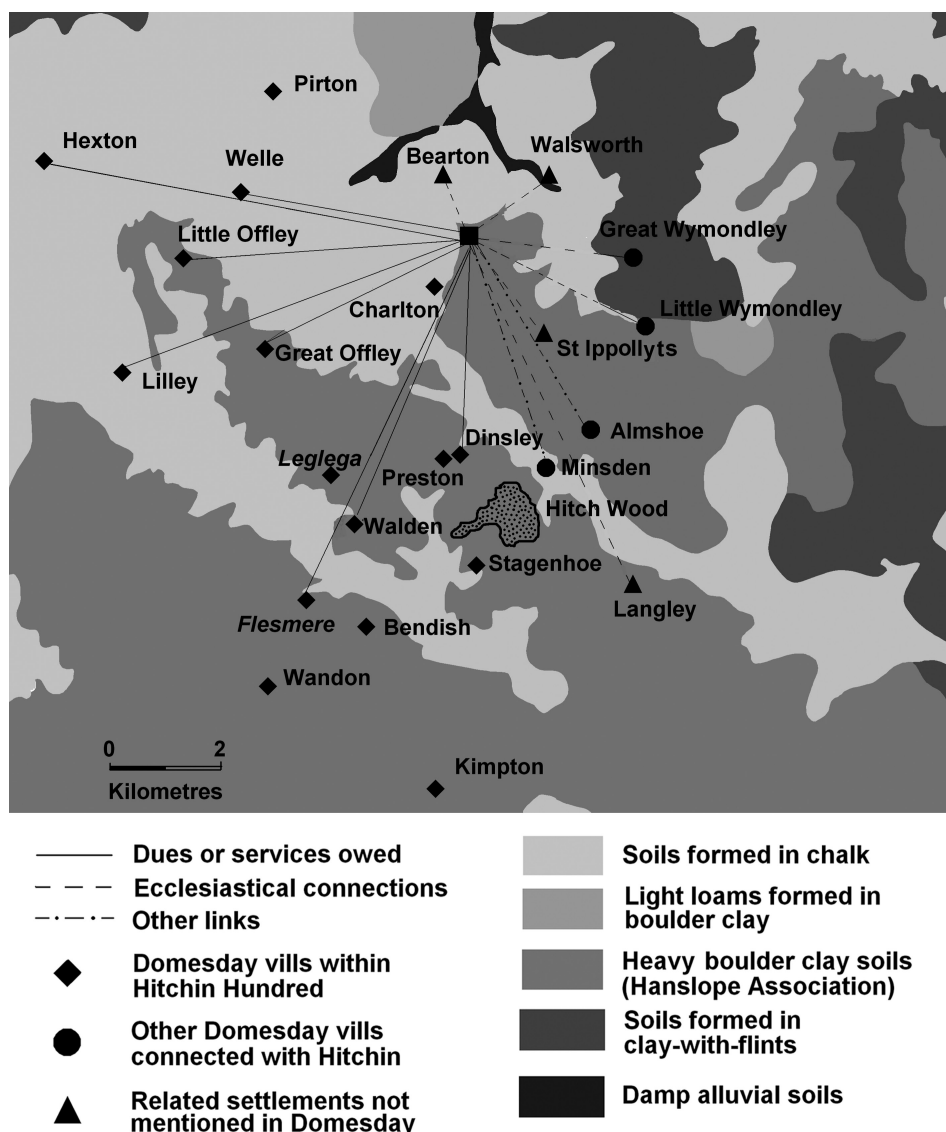
in S. J. Bassett (ed.), *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (Leicester, 1989), pp. 123–40, at p. 133; C. Hart, 'The Tribal Hidage', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 21 (1971), pp. 133–57; D. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London, 1991), pp. 9–12; W. Davies and H. Vierck, 'The Contexts of the Tribal Hidage: Social Aggregates and Settlement Patterns', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 8 (1974), pp. 223–93.

<sup>22</sup> Gover, Mawer and Stenton, *Place-Names of Hertfordshire*, p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> Friel, 'The Hicce', pp. 10–12.

<sup>24</sup> Crick, *Charters of St Albans*, no. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Astle, Aycough and Caley, *Taxatio Ecclesiastica Angliae*.



**Figure 17.** The territory centred on the royal vill of Hitchin in north Hertfordshire. The 'dues and services' are those owed in 1086 by sokemen living within the vill in question; the ecclesiastical connections represent former dependent chapelries. Minsden, a separate Domesday vill, lies within what is now Hitchin parish, while the vill of Almshoe lay in what is now the parish of St Ippollitts, but which was originally a dependent chapelry of Hitchin (after I. Friel, 'The Hicce: an Anglo-Saxon Tribe in the Hitchin Area').

Domesday tells us that at Charlton, Offley, Walden, Hexton and *Welle* the *soc*, or jurisdiction, over the inhabitants lay in Hitchin. More importantly, most of the villas mentioned above contained at least one estate held by sokemen: indeed, this was the main concentration of individuals of this status in Hertfordshire. Domesday further informs us that they owed duties called *avera* and *inward*, 'cartage' and 'escort', at least in the case of those dwelling in Offley, Wain, Flexmore, Lilley, Walden, and Dinsley. It is noteworthy that the most marked cluster of sokemen in Hertfordshire is thus directly associated with what appears to have been an important royal manor, probably originating as a Mercian *villa regis*, something which can be mirrored at other places outside the core zones of peasant freedom in eastern England, although sokemen were also often recorded in other contexts, Domesday remaining silent over the estate centre on which they were dependent. Sokemen were thus the descendants of middle Saxon *ceorls*, and sokes the tattered remnants of ancient territories focused on royal *tuns*.

One of the most important observations we can make about the character of sokemen outside their eastern heartlands concerns the kinds of holdings they possessed. In Lincolnshire, East Anglia and adjacent areas some sokemen held large properties, effectively manors, but the vast majority possessed small and often very small areas of land. But in other regions a significant proportion possessed substantial properties. The sokemen dwelling in the villas around Hitchin were typical (Figure 17). In Wain, for example, there were three holdings in 1066. One was a small manor held by Harold, who also held Hitchin itself. It was assessed at 2 hides and had a total population of eight villeins, five bordars, two cottagers and four slaves. In another context it might well have been termed a berewick of Hitchin. The second holding, which was not described as a manor, was in the hands of an unnamed sokeman, was assessed at a full hide and had a tenant population of two villeins, one border and nine cottagers. A third, assessed at half a hide, was held by another sokeman, with one cottager dwelling beneath him. Nearby Great Offley, assessed at 2 hides and with a recorded population of twenty-three, was held by five sokemen before the Conquest; Little Offley, assessed at one hide and with three tenants, was held by a single sokemen; as was Wellbury, also assessed at a single hide. Some of the Hitchin sokemen held even larger estates. Temple Dinsley, in the hands of the king in 1086, had been held ('as two manors') by two sokemen in 1066. It was assessed at 7 hides, and had a recorded population of no less than nineteen villeins, seven bordars, seven cottagers and six slaves.

Not all of the sokemen dwelling around Hitchin in 1066 held large amounts of land. Two occupied a single virgate in Charlton (they can perhaps be identified with the two cottagers living there in 1086, on what was now a royal manor). A single sokeman held a virgate in Flexmore, with four cottagers holding beneath him; while in Ley Green three sokemen shared another virgate, again with four tenants. Nevertheless, the pattern is clear enough, and is shared more widely across those parts of the country in which sokemen formed a small minority of the population. In Hertfordshire

as a whole, for example, there were around 230 sokemen in 1066 (the precise figure is unclear, owing to ambiguities in the text). In a few cases they are listed with the villeins and bordars of a manor and their holdings are not separately described. The mean average holding of the others was around half a hide; no less than a third appear to have held more than this. Indeed, around 15 per cent of Hertfordshire's sokemen held more than a hide, one in Ware holding 2 hides, two in Rushden sharing 5 hides and two in Dinsley, as already noted, holding 7 between them. In neighbouring Bedfordshire, to the north, where sokemen were rather more numerous (although still thin on the ground by East Anglian standards) the mean average holding was again around half a hide, although the majority held around 3 virgates. Two per cent held more than a hide and half, although less than 1 per cent more than 2 hides. Many again appear to have been the principal holders of estates before the Conquest, usually as groups who were presumably co-heirs, sharing a family holding.

This is rather different from the situation in the east. In Norfolk the average sokeman's holding was around 7 acres (3 hectares), and less than 7 per cent of sokemen held a virgate or more; while in Lincolnshire, according to Hadley, 'sokemen rarely possessed more than forty acres' (approximately 16 hectares). Northamptonshire, with higher numbers of sokemen recorded before the Conquest than either Hertfordshire or Bedfordshire, yet fewer than Lincolnshire or Norfolk, displays an appropriately intermediate pattern. Here sokemen held, on average, just over a virgate. At this point it might be as well to repeat, once again, the cautions and caveats expressed earlier concerning the problems and ambiguities of Domesday, and especially regarding the way in which its record of the social composition of the population is, for most counties, limited for the pre-Conquest period. This said, the overall pattern is clear enough. Where sokemen made up a high proportion of the population the amounts of land they held were in general less than in districts in which they were thinner on the ground.

A few of the Bedfordshire sokemen, holding the largest manors, are individually named, but most are anonymous. In Hertfordshire all are anonymous, but in a number of cases, in villis in which the holdings of a number of such sokemen are listed, the inhabitants also include a named individual who is not specifically described as a sokeman but who appears to have owed similar obligations. At Libury, for example, one of the properties was held before the Conquest by 'Scova, a man of Leofwine'. He is not described as a sokemen but, like those holding land within this vill who are, he was obliged to carry out cartage duties. The strong implication is that individuals of this social group who had held large estates of more than a hide and a half or so were likely to be named in the survey, with their status either not given or perhaps regarded as no longer mattering, ancient dues and services owed on their land having been commuted or forgotten long before.

*Inheritance and mobility*

If sokemen were the descendants of the free *ceorls* of middle Saxon England then their ancestors must have held their land as *folcland*, and in all parts of England there is clear evidence that members of this group continued to practise partible inheritance in the late Saxon period. The *Kalendar* of Bury St Edmunds, for example, states that sokemen owed suit of court by virtue of the lands they held, and that this obligation would, like the land itself, be divided amongst co-heirs.<sup>26</sup> Domesday often describes groups of sokemen holding manors (as in Bedfordshire) or lists a number of distinct groups holding small estates within particular villas (as in Norfolk), and it is likely that these were groups of kinsmen, sharing an inheritance jointly. In Mileham in Norfolk, for example, Archbishop Stigand had held in 1066 '3 sokemen, 1 carucate and 1 acre of land . . . Also 4 sokemen, 30 acres of land . . . Also 1 sokeman, 1 carucate of land; 1 sokeman, 8 acres . . . Also 7 sokemen, 40 acres of land'. Moreover, if sokemen held property that had once been folkland there is a strong implication that the holdings of free men had developed from *bocland*: that is, they held portions of *inland* (including outlying berewicks) which had been alienated by charter and then progressively subdivided by inheritance. In this context, it is noteworthy that in Norfolk, where the two groups appear to have been fairly carefully distinguished, we can see important differences in their spatial distribution. Sokemen were spread fairly evenly across the county, mostly appearing in the entries for royal and hundredal manors, or for those of other places which appear to have once served as royal villas (Figure 18a). Free men in contrast are much more clustered, in three main locations: in north-east Norfolk, especially on the 'island' of Flegg, beside the great coastal marshes where the Broadland rivers enter the sea; on the clay soils beside the peat Fens in the west; and on the boulder-clay plateau which occupies the south-east of the county (Figure 18b). The first of these was an area of particularly favourable soils – the fertile and well-drained Wick Associations, formed in wind-blown loess. The others were districts in which the expansion of cultivation appears to have occurred on a significant scale over the previous two centuries, before which their heavy yet fertile Beccles and Burlingham Association soils had been only sparsely settled.<sup>27</sup> All were areas in which, by and large, population density was well above average for the county, and in which recent demographic growth had probably been rapid. High densities of free men, in other words, were found in areas of demographic expansion.

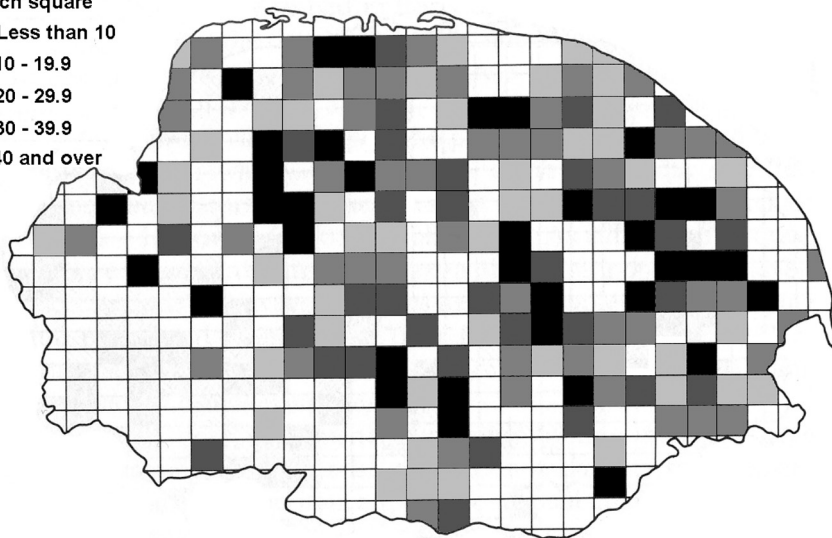
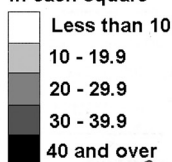
Most members of this group, it would appear, also chose to practise partible inheritance rather than primogeniture. At Buxton in Norfolk, for example, 'Five free men, brothers' held 7 carucates of land in 1086; while at Alby 'Asford, 1 free man' had held a carucate in 1066, but by 1086 it was reported that 'now

<sup>26</sup> Hadley, *The Northern Danelaw*, p. 185.

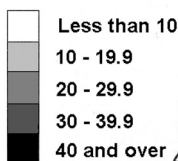
<sup>27</sup> Williamson, *Origins of Norfolk*, pp. 105–33; P. Wade-Martins, *Village Sites in the Launditch Hundred*, published as *East Anglian Archaeology* 10 (1980), pp. 85–6; Rogerson, 'Fransham', pp. 105–8, 124–30.



Percentage of  
recorded population  
in each square



Percentage of  
recorded population  
in each square



0 15  
Kilometres

**Figure 18.** Above: the distribution of sokemen recorded in Norfolk by Domesday Book in 1066 (calculated on the basis of the populations recorded in the villis located within each grid square). Below: the distribution of free men recorded in Norfolk by Domesday Book in 1066 (calculated on the basis of the populations recorded in the villis located within each grid square).

his four sons hold it'. The four unnamed sons, each holding a virgate, would be described by historians in simple terms as 'free peasants'. Whether their father, with a carucate, could so easily be categorised is less certain, and it is again noteworthy that while we know his name, we do not know theirs. Had *his* father perhaps held more extensive estates, comprising 2, 3 or more carucates? The free holdings in Domesday thus appear to represent the remains of once larger estates held as bookland, which had been fragmented by generations of partible inheritance.

Amongst both free men and soke, in other words, partible inheritance could evidently ensure that within a generation, and certainly within two, members of a family could move a long distance along the line of status, from being proud owners of a sizeable estate to petty cultivators of a virgate or less. Indeed, no neat dividing line is evident in the Norfolk folios of Domesday between the named holder of a manor of 5 or 10 carucates, named individuals holding estates of a carucate, like Asford at Alby, and the mass of unnamed free men. Instead there was a spectrum, and along this partible inheritance might propel successive generations in one direction, while luck, and the ability to profit from economic expansion, might move individuals in the other, so that some ultimately 'throve to thegnright'. Differentiation was facilitated, of course, by the fact that both sokeland and free land could be bought and sold: this is evident from the text of Domesday, which frequently tells us whether land could be freely disposed of by particular individuals or whether they could not alienate it: that is, whether they owned it, or occupied it as 'loan-land'.

The high density of free tenures in East Anglia, it should be noted in passing, may explain one distinctive feature of its landscape: the high number of parish churches there, the majority of which were apparently in place (together with some which have since disappeared) by the time of Domesday. Some villages still have two or more churches, occasionally occupying adjacent churchyards. Ability to build and endow a church was one sign of thegnly rank, and in this complex and competitive society, in which individuals and families could move rapidly up or down the social scale, churches may have had a particularly important role as signifiers of status. Some examples were certainly erected by groups of free men, probably members of extended kin groups, rather than by manorial lords.<sup>28</sup>

### *The climate of freedom*

Having discussed some of the key characteristics of the social groups making up the free peasantry of late Saxon England we can now examine why they were so markedly concentrated in the eastern parts of the country. Having noted the relationship between population density and the density of free tenures in Norfolk, we should also note the wider correspondence in the

<sup>28</sup> P. Warner, 'Shared Churchyards, Freeman Church Builders and the Development of Parishes in Eleventh-century East Anglia', *Landscape History* 8 (1986), pp. 39–52.

country as a whole between areas in which the combined ranks of free men and sokemen comprised more than 25 per cent of the recorded population, and those in which Domesday records population densities of around ten or more individuals per square mile (Figure 4). It is hard to see how (other than as a long-term consequence of a baby boom resulting from a wave of rape and pillage) Viking settlement could have engendered high relative population densities, suggesting in turn that both distributions had some third cause and/or were directly causally related. Population densities, as we saw in Chapter 2, were largely a consequence of climatic factors. The east is significantly drier, especially in late summer, than the west, and harvests are less liable to destruction by heavy rain. Frequent harvest failures may have obliged a larger number of peasant cultivators dwelling in western regions to fall into dependence on social superiors with greater command of resources, and greater facilities for the storage of surpluses, than in the east. Stenton described long ago how a *ceorl* might be downgraded to the status of bond tenant by misfortune:

He had few, if any, reserves from which to re-equip himself after a run of bad seasons or a plague of cattle. A band of raiders could at once reduce him to beggary . . . Innumerable *ceorls* must have been compelled to put themselves and their households at the disposal of lords who could offer them food in evil days.<sup>29</sup>

Climatic factors seem to have ensured that this was more likely to occur in the west than in the east of England.

It is probable, however, that the explanation for the 'gradient of freedom' is rather more complex than this. Both free men and sokemen, as we have seen, could possess large estates. But once they had acquired a holding above a certain size they usually ceased to be described by a status label and were instead individually named by Domesday. Where free peasants were recorded in smaller numbers this may thus have been in part because in districts where population growth had been less rapid, holdings had fragmented to a lesser degree. A larger proportion of free individuals thus held parcels of land of sufficient size to ensure that their names are given by Domesday, and they thus fail to appear on maps showing the distribution of the free peasantry, by definition unnamed. But at the same time a proportion of their neighbours would regularly have been rendered landless through the sale of their property in situations of adversity, or more generally found it hard to cope on farms made small through generations of partible inheritance, and were thus keen to accept larger holdings in return for a rent or – more usually – services. Prospering peasants, as much as great landowners, might thus create service-tenancies on their properties.

Yet while a benign climate and rapid demographic expansion led to the faster fragmentation of holdings in the east than in the west, small farms were also more viable here, again because harvest failures were less frequent, so that even *ceorls* living on relatively small acreages could hang on to ancestral freedoms. More importantly, agriculturally productive and populous areas

<sup>29</sup> Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 471.

tended to be economically advanced more generally, providing those with limited acres with a range of other ways of making a living. As Julian Richards and his team have shown, 'there was simply more coinage and metalwork in circulation in the east than the west' in the middle and later Saxon periods: indeed, the areas in which finds recovered by metal-detectorists are most frequent, as mapped by Richards's project, are almost identical to those in which Domesday's free peasants were most numerous, and in which arable land use in the 1940s, as mapped by the Land Utilisation Survey, was most intensive, all three distributions showing, in particular, strong concentrations in northern East Anglia, the east Midlands and the north-east.<sup>30</sup> In western areas, in contrast, more challenging agricultural conditions and lower population densities were evidently associated with a poorer and less monetarised economy, and presumably with a less diversified economic base. There was thus a greater likelihood that small landowners would end up in difficulties, and be forced to sell all or most of their land to neighbours.

In a variety of ways, direct and indirect, climate thus ensured that both upward and downward mobility was greatest in the west, resulting in the effective disappearance of sokemen and *liberi homines*. Risk and hazard, to put it another way, engendered not simply a general downgrading of the peasant class, but a greater degree of social differentiation within it. Similar processes were at work in the east, of course, helping to create the constellation of small manors, mixed with sokelands, found in East Anglia or Lincolnshire or Nottinghamshire: indeed, in post-Conquest times villeins owing some of the heaviest labour services could be found living in the same settlements as remaining members of the free population. The differences between the east and west in this respect were ones of degree, not kind. The most fortunate of the descendants of the free *ceorls* of middle Saxon England thus appear among the named landowners in Domesday: some held estates which were accredited manors, contributing the collective geld of its inhabitants to the king. The less fortunate appear only as the unnamed free; the least fortunate had become villeins, bordars or cottars.

How long had these spatial patterns, the social contrasts between east and west, been developing? I have implied on a number of occasions that they were essentially a product of the tenth and eleventh centuries, a period in which population growth appears to have been rapid. But it is possible that they had begun to emerge earlier. It is noteworthy, for example, that place-names featuring the element *ingas*, 'people of', suggesting kin-based rather than individualised landholding, are strongly concentrated towards the east and south-east of England. Perhaps the more precarious nature of farming in the west led, even in the eighth and ninth centuries, to a greater degree of social stratification here, leading to the more frequent replacement of names which identified places with family groups by -tons, -worths and -steads which were named after the individuals by whom they were owned.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.york.ac.uk/archaeology/VASLE> (Viking and Anglo-Saxon Landscape and Economy): Interpretation and Results; Figure 2. Accessed January 2012.

## *Conclusion*

What I have set out in the previous pages is a model – an explanation which is in plausible accord with most of the available evidence regarding the spatial variations in tenurial and social structures evident in Domesday. At the very least it provides an alternative to explanations which rely solely on the social impact of Viking settlement, and perhaps illustrates again the insights which can be gained from examining aspects of early-medieval settlement and society within their various environmental contexts. But I have in passing once again presented a slightly different, more complex model of how society evolved in the later Anglo-Saxon period than that usually encountered in works of history or landscape history, one which downplays a simple dichotomy between ‘lords’ and ‘peasants’, and thus by implication the role of the former in shaping the physical environment.

We have become accustomed to seeing the hand of territorial lordship in the development of fields, settlement forms and settlement patterns. The emergence of nucleated villages and open fields in the later Saxon period has in particular often been seen as a consequence of the actions of lords who forced their peasants to abandon outlying farms and organise their agricultural activities on more efficient, communal lines. There were of course – as I have emphasised – great men and noble families holding vast estates in later Saxon England, families who had been amassing *bocland* for centuries. Moreover, vills composed of bond tenants had been a feature of the royal demesne in particular from the earliest times, while strong and continuous dominance of a relatively marginal environment by a landed magnate may often have led to the wholesale downgrading of sokemen to bond manorial tenants, as perhaps happened on many ecclesiastical domains. But many of the manors we meet in the pages of Domesday may have developed, ‘from below’ as it were, quite late in the Saxon period, as the combined consequence of rapid demographic expansion and accelerating social mobility, and across much of eastern England the hand of lordship rested lightly on the peasantry even at the time of the Conquest. Social boundaries were still fluid at a local level in many parts of England in the tenth and eleventh centuries. It was only really in the aftermath of the Conquest that important changes in concepts of land tenure occurred which fossilised social structures along what were effectively class lines, as primogeniture was universally adopted by larger landowners and, at least for a time, the transfer of estates by sale came to an end.

## Two Countrysides?

### *Introduction*

Interesting though spatial differences in Saxon social and tenurial organisation may be to some researchers, most landscape historians and archaeologists have concentrated their attention on other aspects of regional variation in early-medieval England, and in particular on the ways in which patterns of settlement, and the character of field systems, developed in radically different ways in different parts of the country. By the thirteenth century the central areas of England were characterised by what many describe as 'champion' countryside. They possessed a settlement pattern of nucleated villages whose inhabitants practised highly communal forms of agriculture. The holdings of individual farmers – and usually the demesnes, or home farms, of manorial lords – lay intermingled, as a multiplicity of small unhedged strips which were usually scattered evenly through two or three extensive open fields. Such landscapes predominated in a broad belt of countryside extending across the centre of England all the way from Northumberland to the south coast.<sup>1</sup> To the south-east of this 'village zone', and to the west, 'woodland' landscapes of various kinds could be found (Figure 19). In these districts, settlement was less nucleated in character and where villages existed they did so alongside other forms of habitation – hamlets, loose agglomerations of dwellings around small greens or extensive commons, and isolated farms standing in the midst of their own fields.<sup>2</sup> Even today such areas leap out from the map, with their numerous diminutive hamlets bearing names featuring the element 'end' or 'green', and with isolated farms whose medieval origins are attested by their obscure names, or by the fact that they are still surrounded by water-filled moats.

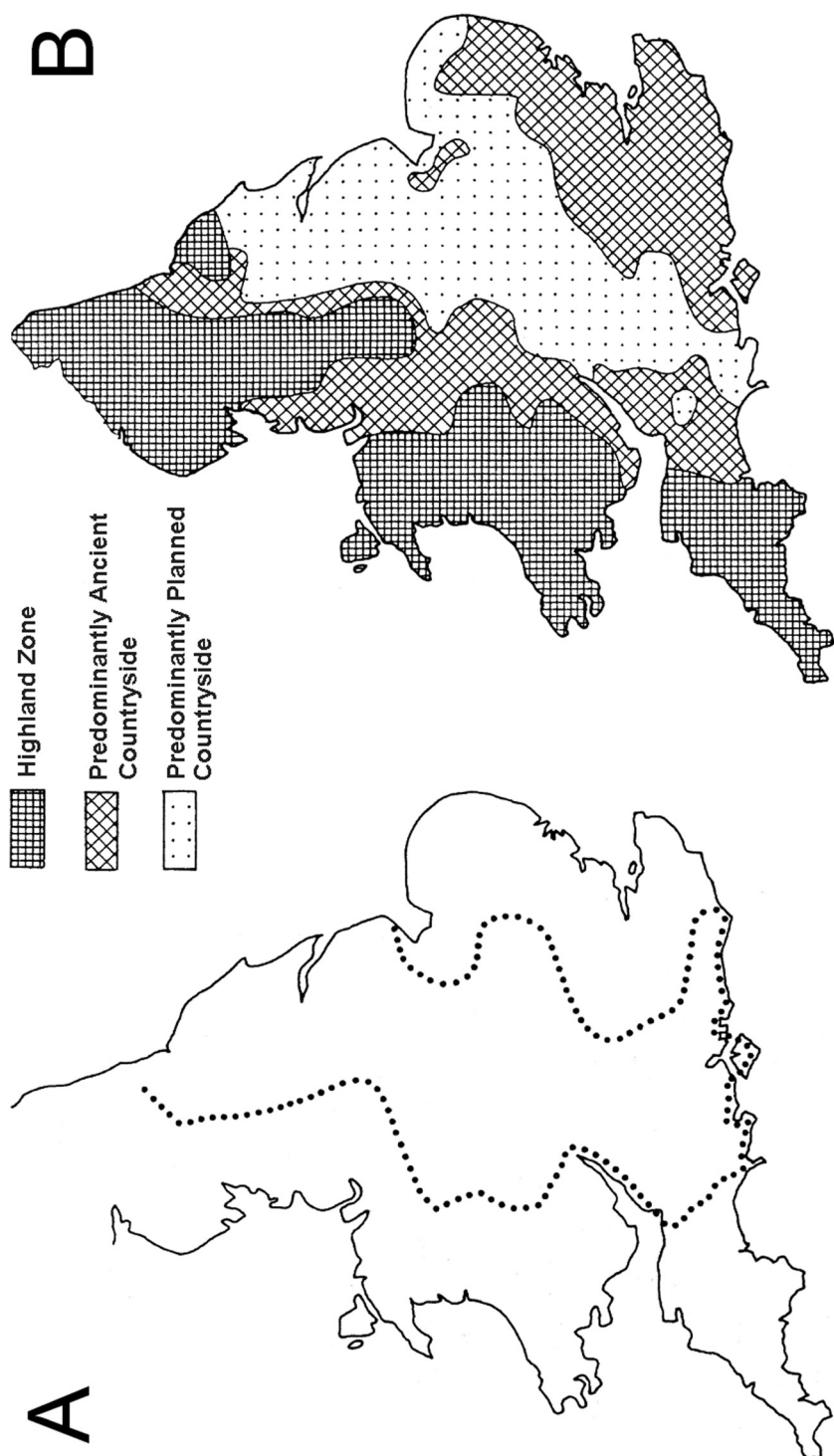
When these 'woodland' countrysides were first named and described by topographers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they were mainly characterised by enclosed fields, individually occupied and owned. But in the Middle Ages many had possessed areas – and often very large areas – of open fields, although these differed in a number of important respects from those found in the Midland regions, and in consequence tended to disappear

<sup>1</sup> Homans, *English Villagers*, p. 21; Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, 164–79; B. K. Roberts and S. Wrathmell, *An Atlas of Rural Settlement in England* (London, 2000).

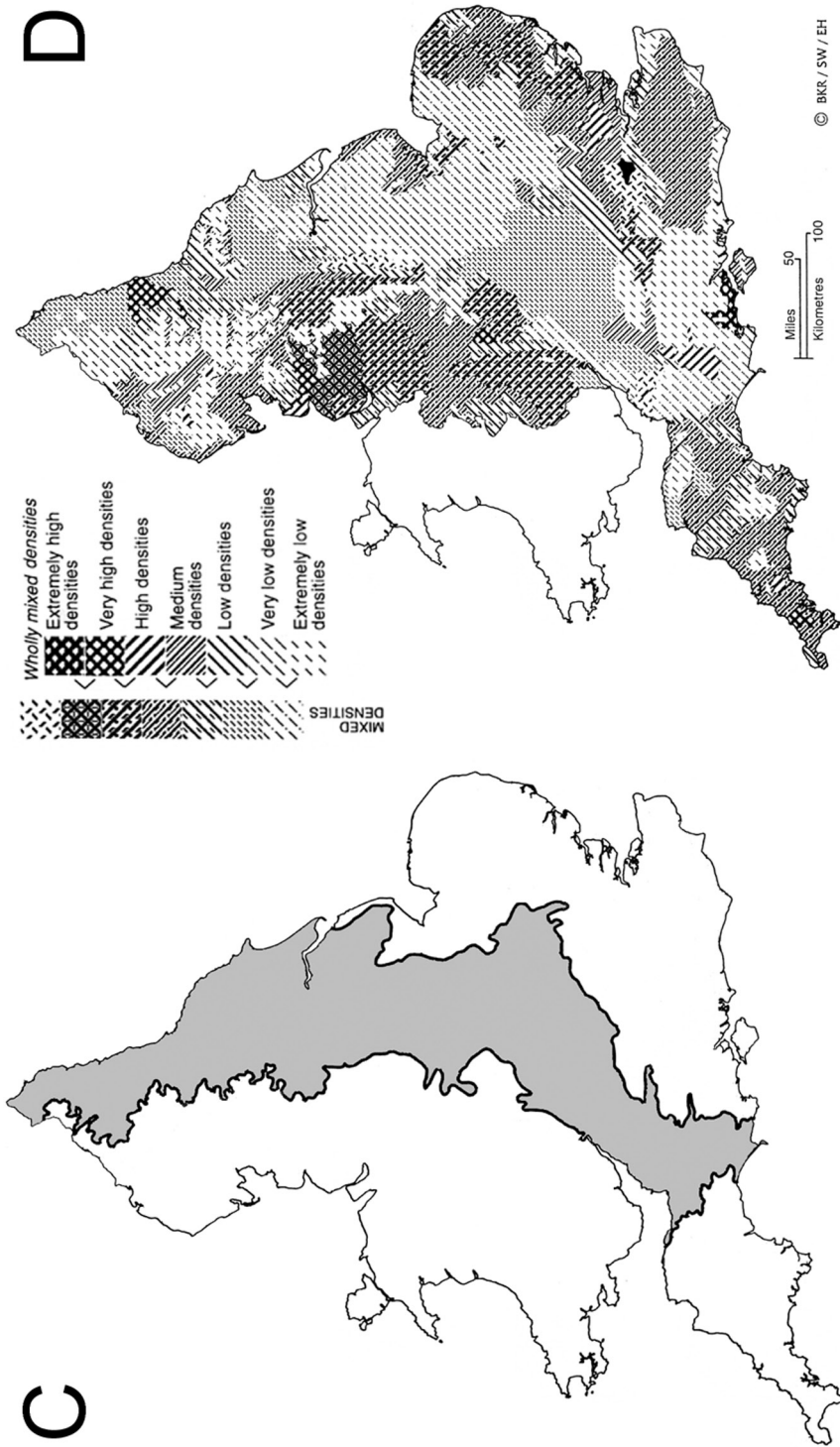
<sup>2</sup> Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and Place*; T. Williamson, *Shaping Medieval Landscapes: Settlement, Society, Environment* (Macclesfield, 2003), pp. 91–118; Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, pp. 4–6.



**Figure 19.** Landscape regions in England



*a.* the boundaries of Howard Gray's 'Midland System'; *b.* Oliver Rackham's distinction between the 'planned' and the 'ancient' countryside.



c. the 'Central Province', as defined by B. K. Roberts and S. Wrathmell, *An Atlas of Rural Settlement in England*;  
d. densities of dispersed settlement mapped by Roberts and Wrathmell in *Atlas of Rural Settlement*.

at an early date through informal piecemeal enclosure. In the champion, in contrast, enclosure mainly came both later, and in the form of the large-scale planned redistributions of property, often involving parliamentary acts. In consequence, the landscape of such districts was mainly created by post-medieval surveyors. The champion thus evolved into what the historical ecologist Oliver Rackham has termed the 'planned countryside', of rectilinear fields defined by species-poor hedges, as opposed to the 'ancient countryside' of the former 'woodland' areas, with their older and more biologically diverse hedges, and more irregular field patterns.<sup>3</sup>

'Woodland' and 'champion', 'planned' and 'ancient' countryside, are sometimes employed as if they were interchangeable terms, but they are not. 'Champion' was a term originally employed by early-modern topographers to describe landscapes of nucleated villages farming extensive open fields, and is generally used in this sense by modern historians. 'Planned countryside' is a description for the kind of landscape which usually replaced such environments in the course of the post-medieval period. This is part of a wider diversity of generalised terms employed in discussions of regional landscapes which are almost, but not quite, interchangeable. The first historian to attempt a classification of medieval landscape types, Howard Gray, thus used the term 'Midland system' for open fields featuring an even distribution of holdings, and in which fallowing was organised on the basis of two or three great fields. But in some districts villages farmed extensive areas of open fields which were organised with less regularity, and in which the arable might be grouped into four or more fields. Such districts would also have been described as champion by early topographers, because they comprised extensive areas of unhedged, open land: but they were clearly different, in Gray's eyes, from the classic Midland landscapes. To add to the confusion, Brian Roberts and Stuart Wrathmell defined – on the basis of a project, sponsored by English Heritage, involving the meticulous mapping of settlements shown on nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey maps – an area which they described as the 'Central Province', 'the great zone of nucleations',<sup>4</sup> lying within the Midlands and covering a rather smaller area than either Gray's Midland system or the predominantly planned countryside defined by Rackham. This may appear to be a pedantic matter but it is one sign that the idea of the 'two countrysides' is to an extent mythical. 'Woodland' and champion, and indeed the other broad classifications employed by researchers, each usually embraced a range of landscape types, and many regions displayed intermediate characteristics. The concept of the 'two countrysides' remains, nevertheless, a useful place to begin any enquiry into the varied landscapes of medieval England.

<sup>3</sup> Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, pp. 1–5.

<sup>4</sup> B. K. Roberts and S. Wrathmell, 'Dispersed Settlement in England: A National View', in P. Everson and T. Williamson (eds.), *The Archaeology of Landscape: Studies Presented to Christopher Taylor* (Manchester, 1998), pp. 95–116, at p. 100.

Champion

The most important feature of the champion lands was not so much their extensive open fields as their nucleated patterns of settlement. The sizeable clusters of dwellings were usually villages, in the sense that the territory which each farmed also approximated to an ecclesiastical parish, but a minority were technically hamlets in that, while often classified as separate townships for administrative purposes and farming their own set of fields, they did not possess a church of their own. Such settlements, whatever their precise status, took a wide variety of morphological forms, the final manifestations of which – as portrayed on post-medieval maps – have been studied, and classified into various plan types, for several decades by historical geographers, and most notably by Brian Roberts, taking into account such things as whether dwellings are ranged along roads or are clustered around a green, or whether the plan of the settlement as a whole has discernible sub-units.<sup>5</sup> There are inevitable difficulties with this kind of approach, arising from the subjectivity involved in deciding, for example, how wide a strip of land needs to be before it ceases to be a street and becomes a green; and in practice many villages have what are often described as ‘agglomerate’ (or rather formless) plans. Such exercises in morphological analysis also involve some consideration of the degree of regularity exhibited by the constituent elements of the village plan, and in particular by the tofts on which the individual farms stood. There is a long tradition of interpreting regularity as a consequence of planning, going back to the 1960s, with Allerston’s pioneering research in Yorkshire, where regular village plans were seen as a consequence of the recolonisation of the north of England following the harrying of the North by William I in the 1080s.<sup>6</sup> Since then, evidence of regularly laid-out tofts and crofts has been detected in many villages in the central areas of England, and in more general terms attributed to the activities of lordly planners.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes the entire layout of the village appears to have been planned; sometimes only one or more sections, perhaps representing planned additions to the initial settlement.

The open fields associated with nucleated villages exhibited their most sophisticated and regular forms on the clays and limestones of the Midlands. The farms of individual villagers – each usually a virgate or yardland (equivalent to around 20–30 acres, 8–12 hectares) or some subdivision of this unit – comprised numerous small unhedged strips (‘lands’ or ‘selions’), each usually around 7 metres in width, which were intermingled with those of neighbours and scattered evenly throughout the arable of the township in

<sup>5</sup> B. K. Roberts, ‘Village Plans in County Durham: A Preliminary Statement’, *Medieval Archaeology* 16 (1972), pp. 33–56; B. K. Roberts, *The Making of the English Village* (London, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> P. Allerston, ‘English Village Development: Findings from the Pickering District of Yorkshire’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 5 (1970), pp. 95–109.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *Village and Farmstead*; Brown and Foard, ‘Saxon Landscape’, pp. 75–7, 91–2; P. Everson, C. C. Taylor, and C. J. Dunn, *Change and Continuity: Rural Settlement in North-West Lincolnshire* (London, 1991), pp. 16–17.

the manner already described.<sup>8</sup> Manorial demesnes (the home farms of manorial lords) might likewise take the form of strips dispersed amongst the fields but they sometimes formed compact blocks near to manor houses, although in some cases this was evidently the consequence of reorganisation in the course of the Middle Ages. Most of the strips displayed a gentle sinuosity, having been gradually deformed over the years by the operation of ploughs in parcels lacking physical boundaries. Some took the form of a shallow reversed S, caused by the way that the ploughman, working with a large plough and a large team of oxen, tended to move to his left as he approached the end of the strip, in order to avoid too tight a turning circle. Others displayed different forms of gentle sinuosity, their shape having been adapted to the lie of the land. The strips were usually ploughed in ridges, a practice intended to improve drainage, and where (as was often the case) open fields were laid to pasture following enclosure these were preserved as the earthworks known to archaeologists as ridge and furrow.

The lands were grouped into blocks called furlongs (in some areas, 'shotts' or 'wongs') and these in turn were usually aggregated into larger units called fields. One of these lay fallow each year and was grazed by the village livestock. By post-medieval times there were usually three such fields in each township, sometimes more, but most townships in the eleventh and twelfth centuries seem to have organised their arable into two great fields, ensuring that around a half of their land area lay uncultivated each year.<sup>9</sup> The change from a two-field to a three-field system – like the widespread development of systems based on four, five or more fields in the course of the post-medieval period – could be achieved without any redistribution of holdings within the fields. Where properties were scattered evenly, it made little difference where, precisely, the boundaries of the particular cropping sectors might be drawn.

Whatever the number of fields, the grazing of stock on the fallows not only provided additional pasturage in areas in which grassland was sometimes in relatively short supply. Their dung also, and probably more importantly, helped to restore to the arable land the nitrogen and other nutrients which were constantly being lost through cropping. These were, of necessity, highly communal agricultural systems. Where holdings lay in a multiplicity of small strips, and subject to rights of communal grazing at certain times of the year, regular meetings of farmers would have been required to decide the order in which particular lands would be ploughed, harrowed and seeded, and the course of cropping to be followed within each furlong. Communal agrarian routines were usually overseen by the court of the principal manor in the township.

While the size of a yardland or virgate varied from township to township, within each one they generally covered the same approximate area, and had

<sup>8</sup> D. Hall, *Medieval Fields* (Aylesbury, 1982); Hall, *The Open Fields of Northamptonshire*.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, *Open Fields of Northamptonshire*, pp. 51–65; H. E. Hallam, *Settlement and Society. A Study of the Early Agrarian History of South Lincolnshire* (Cambridge, 1965), Appendix 2, pp. 231–6.



similar rights to grazing and hay meadows attached.<sup>10</sup> The various obligations owed to manorial lords in terms of rents and services, as well as local administrative offices and roles within the community, were also usually calculated and allocated on the basis of the yardland. In this context it is important to emphasise that in many of these townships the holdings were laid out across the fields in a particularly structured fashion, according to a regular sequence, so that in every furlong the strips of the tenants fell in a fixed, recurrent order. It remains uncertain how many open fields displayed this kind of regularity. In the case of Northamptonshire, according to David Hall's research, such arrangements appear to have existed in over three-quarters of townships,<sup>11</sup> and Hall has further suggested that the number of yardlands often bore a close mathematical relationship to the number of hides at which a township was assessed in Domesday. In some, there appear to have been 8, in some 10, and in others 12 or 16 yardlands to the hide.<sup>12</sup> Other counties have not received the same degree of detailed scholarly examination as Northamptonshire but references to 'sun-division' or *solskifte* (a Danish term) in medieval documents – the method by which holdings were described in terms of their position in each furlong, in notional sequence following the progress of the sun from south and east to north and west – suggest that similar arrangements could be found across much of the champion belt to the north of Northamptonshire, and sporadically to the south-west, mainly but not exclusively in districts characterised by heavy clay soils.<sup>13</sup> Regular tenurial cycles can be detected in documents drawn up long after they probably came into existence because across many parts of champion England there were strong pressures to prevent a free market in villein land, of the kind which had developed in many non-Midland areas by the late thirteenth century. Lords, and perhaps communities, were keen to maintain the integrity and clarity of holdings, because this made it easier to assess the scale of the obligations which each farmer owed in terms of rents, taxes and duties.

Champion landscapes like this could be found widely across the Midlands but on the large tracts of light, freely draining soils – formed in chalk and sands – lying immediately to the south and east slightly different arrangements could be found. In Wessex, on the chalk escarpment of the Chilterns and the East Anglian Heights, or on the Wolds of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, the individual strips were less likely to be ploughed in ridges. Not only was drainage a minor consideration on light land, but in addition the soils were sometimes thin, so that ridging would have entailed ploughing deeply into the sterile subsoil on the margins of the strip. Instead of being separated by deep 'water furrows', individual lands were often bounded by narrow unploughed baulks of grass. Such landscapes also often featured more extensive tracts of unploughed ground – downs and heaths – than were usually to be found in Midland districts. In part this was because the

<sup>10</sup> Hall, *Open Fields of Northamptonshire*, pp. 77–94.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 115–22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 82–6.

<sup>13</sup> Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and Place*, p. 125.



land in question was so poor that it did not repay cultivation; but it was also because the soil in those areas which were under cultivation was light and comparatively infertile, and easily leached of nutrients, so that it could only be kept in heart by substantial and regular applications of dung. These were the classic areas of 'sheep-corn' husbandry, in which flocks were grazed on the extensive pastures by day and close-folded on the arable land by night, the treading of the sheep serving to incorporate the dung and urine effectively within the ploughsoil (see above, pp. 48–9).<sup>14</sup> Close-folding was rarely practised in clayland areas, in part because it was less necessary but also because it tended to impact the soil.

### *'Woodland'*

The landscapes found in the 'woodland' districts lying to the south and east, and to the west, of the village zone were in general more varied in character.<sup>15</sup> In many districts villages of a kind existed, alongside farms and hamlets, but this was not invariably the case and in parts of Essex or Kent, or across much of the Marcher counties, parish churches were often accompanied by only the manor house and a few cottages, while in parts of East Anglia they sometimes stood completely alone and there was no obvious village nucleus. Sometimes the dispersed element consisted only of isolated farms; sometimes there was a mixture of farms and hamlets. Perhaps the most common settlement forms, especially across much of south-eastern England, were clusters of dwellings around the margins of small, pocket-handkerchief greens; or loose girdles of farms strung around the margins of much larger commons, and along the roads connecting these.<sup>16</sup>

As I noted earlier, it is often suggested that these 'woodland' areas did not have much in the way of open arable in the Middle Ages. William Harrison in 1597 famously contrasted the two countrysides in a way which directly connected their settlements and the character of their fields:

It is so, that our soile being divided into champaigne ground and woodland, the houses of the first lie uniformelie builded in everie town together, with streets and lanes; whereas in the woodland countries (except here and there, in great market towns) they stand scattered abroad, each one dwelling in the midst of his owne occupieng.<sup>17</sup>

But while by early-modern times these regions were mostly characterised by enclosed fields, occupied in severalty, this was not the general rule in

<sup>14</sup> Kerridge, *Agricultural Revolution*, pp. 42–5.

<sup>15</sup> B. K. Roberts, 'Field Systems of the West Midlands', in A. R. H. Baker and R. A. Butlin (eds.), *Studies of Field Systems in the British Isles* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 195–205; M. R. Postgate, 'Field Systems of East Anglia', in Baker and Butlin (eds.), *Studies in Field Systems*, pp. 281–324; D. Roden, 'Field Systems of the Chilterns and their Environs', in Baker and Butlin (eds.), *Studies in Field Systems*, pp. 325–76; Hunter, *Field Systems in Essex*; Martin and Satchell, *Where Most Enclosures Be*; Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and Place*, pp. 147–73.

<sup>16</sup> P. Warner, *Greens, Commons and Clayland Colonisation* (Leicester, 1987).

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Homans, *English Villagers*, p. 21.

the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. True, there were some areas, such as the Weald of Kent or Arden in the west Midlands, in which the open arable always occupied a small area and most of the land lay in hedged closes. But more typical were the boulder clays of east Hertfordshire and western Essex. Here continuous areas of open fields could be found on the lighter soils, where rivers had cut broad valleys into the underlying chalk and the clays soils on the sloping sides of the valleys were relatively freely draining. Smaller areas of open arable – interspersed with enclosed land, woods and commons – were scattered across the heavier Hanslope Association soils of the interfluves (Figure 20).

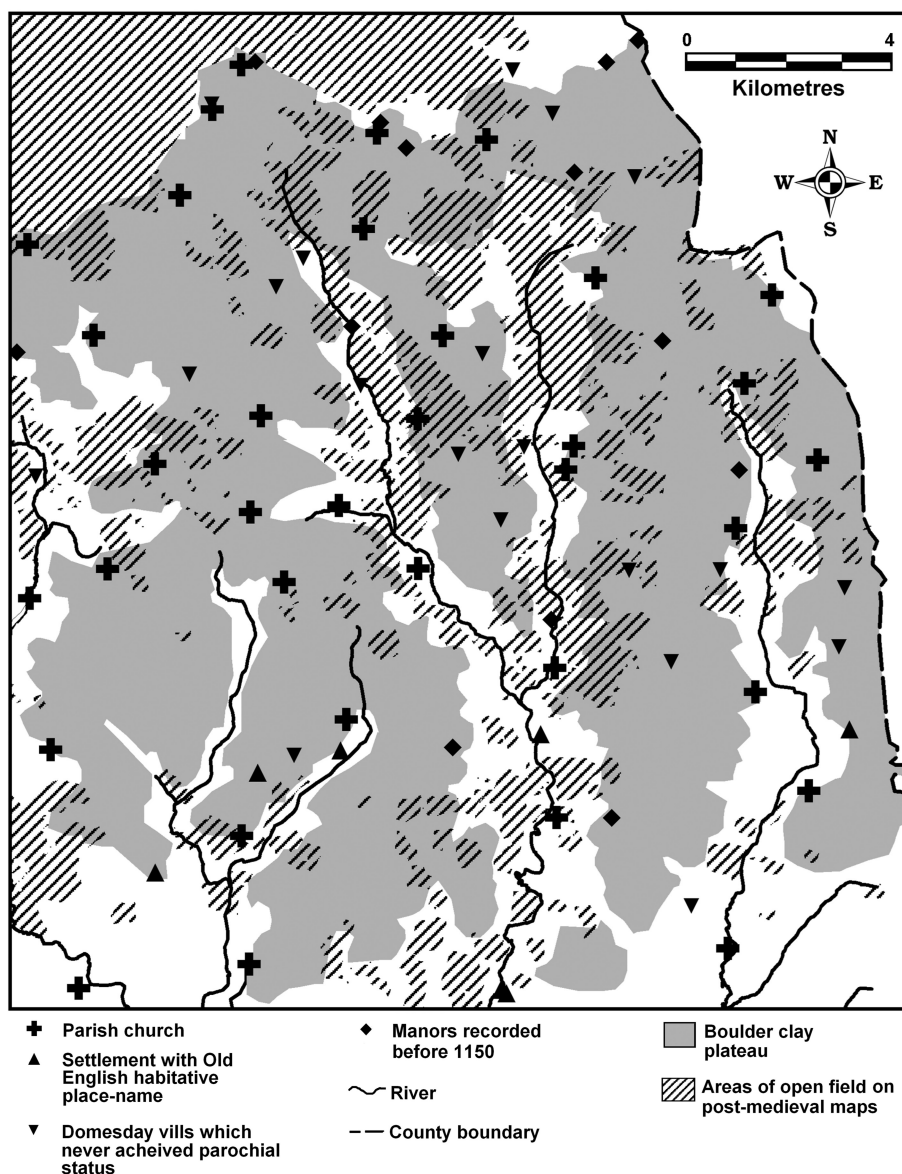
Different again was the situation in east Norfolk, where there was, by the thirteenth century, 'a basic pattern of extensive commonfields, intensively parcellated, and divided amongst a myriad of separate small-holders', with very little land held in severalty.<sup>18</sup> Such variations in the relative extent of open and enclosed land were in part related to soil type, in the sense that the lighter, more freely draining land in any district tended, by the thirteenth century, to be characterised by intermixed arable, so that (for example) the contrast between valleys and upland plateaux evident in eastern Hertfordshire and western Essex was replicated in the Chiltern Hills in Oxford and Buckinghamshire, although here the higher ground was occupied by clay-with-flints and plateau gravels, rather than by glacial till. But complicating and overriding this pattern was another clear tendency: for the area of open field to be greatest where the population density was highest, as in east Norfolk. What we may loosely term 'woodland' districts thus differed in this respect from champion ones: for where settlement was nucleated, the arable was always organised entirely into open fields, whether in areas of low population density (such as the East Anglian Breckland), moderate density (such as Northamptonshire or Leicestershire) or very high density (Lincolnshire).

The precise character of the field systems found in areas of dispersed settlement displayed much variation. In general, the named fields were smaller and more numerous than in Midland districts, and the holdings of individual tenants were usually clustered in restricted areas – normally close to their farm – instead of being scattered evenly throughout the area of the township or parish, as was usual in the regular open fields of the Midlands.<sup>19</sup> In some districts, as in the Chiltern Hills, this was partly because parishes contained a number of small hamlets, each with its own diminutive field system containing the lands of a handful of farms.<sup>20</sup> In parts of East Anglia, in contrast, as in east Norfolk, farms were not distributed in neat clusters, but sprawled in a disorganised fashion around ribbons of interconnecting

<sup>18</sup> B. M. S. Campbell, 'The Extent and Layout of Common Fields in Eastern Norfolk', *Norfolk Archaeology* 28 (1981), pp. 5–32, at p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> Roberts, 'Field Systems of the West Midlands'; Postgate, 'Field Systems of East Anglia'; Roden, 'Field Systems of the Chilterns'; Hunter, *Field Systems in Essex*; Martin and Satchell, *Where Most Enclosures Be*; pp. 77–190, *passim*.

<sup>20</sup> Roden, 'Field Systems of the Chilterns', p. 329.



**Figure 20.** Early settlements and open fields in north-east Hertfordshire. The extent of open fields is as shown on the earliest surviving maps of the area. The settlements are those certainly, or very probably, in existence by the later eleventh century (see text). The boulder-clay plateau is extensively dissected by the Rivers Beane, Quin, Ash, Rib and their tributaries. The main areas of open field were located on the light soils in their valleys; late Saxon settlements on the valley floors, or on the margins of the clay plateau above. The district is bounded to the north by the champion landscapes of the chalk escarpment of the East Anglian Heights, where open arable was more continuous. Sources are discussed in A. Rowe and T. Williamson, *Hertfordshire: A Landscape History* (Hatfield, in press).

commons. Holdings were clustered in the open fields near to each, but in a fairly chaotic fashion.<sup>21</sup> Whatever the precise layout of holdings, communal controls on the practice of farming were often (although by no means always) less rigorous and pervasive than in the Midlands. It was partly for this reason, but partly because of the clustered character of holdings, that the open fields in these districts were generally enclosed earlier than those in Midland districts, by informal, piecemeal methods. Because there were usually only a few proprietors in each part of the fields holdings could be consolidated through purchase or exchange with comparative ease.<sup>22</sup>

### *Explaining regional variation*

Until the 1950s or 1960s variations in medieval fields and settlement were often explained in essentially ethnic terms: that is, they were thought to represent the areas settled by particular tribal groups (or combinations of tribes) in the Dark Ages. Howard Gray in 1915 thus saw the Midland system – his term for the champion landscapes of nucleated villages and extensive regular open fields – as a direct importation from the Saxon homelands in northern Germany and southern Scandinavia.<sup>23</sup> Its concentration in the central regions of England, he believed, reflected their ‘thorough Germanisation’ in the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>24</sup> In Kent and East Anglia, in contrast, existing Romano-British patterns of land-holding had been taken over wholesale by Saxon settlers, but properties had subsequently fragmented through the effects of partible inheritance. In East Anglia, a later wave of Danish settlement produced a high density of free tenures, and more complex systems of manorial organisation. In Kent, fields and settlement continued to develop largely on indigenous lines until the tenurial upheavals of the Norman Conquest. In the middle decades of the century many, perhaps most, scholars emphasised the importance of race and tribal custom in the genesis of regional variation, although there was potential for disagreement over precisely which racial groups were responsible for which landscapes, with Homans for example arguing that the distinctive social institutions, field systems and settlement patterns of East Anglia were the consequence of its settlement by Dark Age immigrants from Frisia.<sup>25</sup>

Readers may have noted already that the broad distributions of landscape types mapped in various ways in Figure 19 bear little if any relationship with the kinds of cultural provinces discussed in previous chapters. Nor, perhaps more importantly, do they correspond clearly with any of the supposed settlement areas of early ethnic groups which have been proposed by

<sup>21</sup> Campbell, ‘Extent and Layout of Common Fields’, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> J. A. Yelling, *Common Field and Enclosure* (London, 1977), pp. 11–29; T. Williamson, ‘Understanding Enclosure’, *Landscapes* 1 (2000), pp. 56–79.

<sup>23</sup> H. L. Gray, *English Field Systems* (Cambridge, MA, 1915).

<sup>24</sup> Gray, *English Field Systems*, p. 415.

<sup>25</sup> H. C. Homans, ‘The Explanation of English Regional Differences’, *Past and Present* 42 (1969), pp. 18–34.

archaeologists over the years. As suggested earlier, we should not necessarily expect the distribution of farming systems, and associated patterns of settlement and fields, to be structured by the same kinds of cultural influences as moulded the patterns displayed by language, beliefs or fashions. But it is not for these kinds of reason that historians and archaeologists began to reject the old ethnic models, but rather because of changes in the ways they conceptualised the development of agrarian systems, and in particular because of new archaeological evidence which was produced in the 1970s. Field-walking in the Midland county of Northamptonshire, principally by Glenn Foard, revealed that the initial Anglo-Saxon settlement pattern had not comprised tightly clustered, nucleated villages, but had instead featured numerous small sites located away from the modern settlements, single farms or small hamlets which had later been over-ploughed by the medieval open fields.<sup>26</sup> Villages had evidently come into existence at some later period, although – given the difficulties of dating early and middle Saxon pottery in the Midlands – precisely when remained unclear. The small, outlying sites had, however, evidently been abandoned by the time that Saxo-Norman pottery was introduced, in the second half of the ninth century, after which date occupation was largely or entirely restricted to the areas which, by the thirteenth century, were occupied by nucleated villages.<sup>27</sup>

Additional light was thrown on these developments by the examination of village plans, again largely in Northamptonshire, with Christopher Taylor arguing that many villages were polyfocal settlements – that is, they had developed through the expansion and fusion of two or more small, originally separate nuclei, presumably survivors from the scattered pattern of early settlements discovered through field-walking.<sup>28</sup> Others displayed regular layouts of tofts of the kind already described, which appeared to indicate that they had been deliberately planned, either at the time of the initial nucleation, or at some later stage. Similar evidence has since emerged from elsewhere in England. At Shapwick in Somerset, for example, the village probably only came into existence in the tenth century and was apparently laid out in a planned form, with a ladder-like pattern of tofts between two roads.<sup>29</sup>

These discoveries made it impossible to believe that villages and open fields had been introduced, fully formed, into the Midlands in the course of the fifth and sixth centuries. But by the 1970s most historians had already, for rather different reasons, come to question whether Midland open fields were really as ancient as Gray and most of his contemporaries believed, and had begun to formulate models for their emergence which were rooted not in notions of cultural identity or tribal custom but in agrarian and demographic

<sup>26</sup> G. Foard, 'Systematic Fieldwalking and the Investigation of Saxon Settlement in Northamptonshire', *World Archaeology* 9 (1978), pp. 357–74.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis, Mitchell-Fox and Dyer, *Village, Hamlet and Field*, p. 81; Brown and Foard, 'Saxon Landscape', pp. 73–82.

<sup>28</sup> C. Taylor, 'Polyfocal Settlement and the English Village', *Medieval Archaeology* 21 (1977), pp. 189–93.

<sup>29</sup> C. Gerrard and M. Aston, *The Shapwick Project* (London, 2007).



developments occurring some time after the migration period. In 1964 Joan Thirsk published an important article in which she argued that the Midland system only developed as late as the twelfth or even thirteenth centuries, through the remodelling of earlier, less regular arrangements of fields of the kind which continued to survive in woodland regions outside the Midland belt.<sup>30</sup> She suggested that open fields of all kinds – in the sense of intermixed strips of open arable – had partly developed as a result of partible inheritance and partly, echoing a suggestion made in the 1930s by T. A. M. Bishop, through communal assarting, as farmers divided in an equitable fashion land which they had jointly reclaimed from areas formerly shared as common pastures.<sup>31</sup> But as cultivation expanded, she suggested, so the area available for grazing dwindled. Farmers were forced to use more intensively the marginal grazing provided by the aftermath of the harvest, and by the fallows. This was difficult where properties lay intermingled in small and unenclosed parcels, for one man could hardly graze his own lands while those of neighbours lay under crops. Thirsk argued that farmers were thus, of necessity, drawn into ever-closer cooperation, a process which culminated in the adoption of a pattern of farming in which a single, continuous area of fallow occupied a third or a half of a township – the hallmark of the Midland system.

Thirsk's proposed chronology was difficult to square with the new evidence from Northamptonshire and elsewhere, which suggested that the development of villages – and presumably therefore the laying out of their associated fields – had occurred before the ninth century. But her model was in itself extremely influential, and could be adapted by researchers to the new archaeological evidence. So too could the models of tenurial development formulated in the 1970s by Glanville Jones.<sup>32</sup> Some historians and archaeologists saw a very direct connection between the fission of the multiple estate and the changes in the character of fields and settlements, Harold Fox for example suggesting that the sudden severance of communities from distant grazing grounds which occurred as large territories fragmented may have precipitated, very suddenly, the kind of grazing crisis envisaged by Thirsk.<sup>33</sup> Others suggested that the emergence of a plethora of local lords, each with his own demesne, resulting from fission facilitated the reorganisation of the landscape on the lines envisaged by Thirsk. Some, most notably Bruce Campbell, went so far as to argue that peasant communities would not themselves have been capable of effecting such a profound disruption to existing property rights.<sup>34</sup> Robert Dodgshon's detailed account of open-field systems in Britain as a

<sup>30</sup> J. Thirsk, 'The Common Fields', *Past and Present* 29 (1966), pp. 3–29.

<sup>31</sup> T. A. M. Bishop, 'Assarting and the Growth of the Open Fields', *Economic History Review* 6 (1935), pp. 26–40.

<sup>32</sup> Jones, 'Multiple Estates and Early Settlement'.

<sup>33</sup> Fox, 'Approaches to the Adoption of the Midland System'.

<sup>34</sup> B. M. S. Campbell, 'Commonfields Origins – The Regional Dimension', in Rowley (ed.), *Origins of Open Field Agriculture*, pp. 112–29; R. Dodgshon, *The Origins of British Field Systems: An Interpretation* (London, 1980), pp. 137–49.



whole likewise placed particular emphasis on tenurial change, lords and manors in the evolution of developed open-field agriculture.<sup>35</sup>

Not all historians and historians writing in the last decades of the twentieth century agreed that lords were key figures in nucleation and open-field formation. In an important study published in 1997 Carenza Lewis, Patrick Mitchell-Fox and Christopher Dyer saw the emergence of champion landscapes as a consequence of economic, agrarian and demographic factors operating in the late Saxon and early post-Conquest periods but were ambivalent about the importance of lordly direction. The most important driver for change was much as Thirsk had proposed thirty years before. As population rose, as holdings became subdivided and intermixed, and as common pastures contracted, recurrent disputes arose among peasant cultivators:

A peaceful option for a long-term resolution of their difficulties involved the inhabitants reorganising their numerous farms and hamlets into common fields where the problems of competition would be minimised. The animals of the whole community were pastured together on the land which lay fallow or awaited spring cultivation.<sup>36</sup>

But the importance of tenurial change in the evolution of champion landscapes continued, nevertheless, to be emphasised by many scholars, particularly archaeologists, in part because so many villages appeared to have originally been planned. The evidence for this, moreover, was not only morphological – the recognition that villages frequently included one or more blocks of regular, carefully spaced plots – but also archaeological. Excavations at the Northamptonshire village of Raunds seemed to reveal that a number of planned rows of tofts had been added, in late Saxon times, to the two large farms already in existence there.<sup>37</sup>

The suggestion that champion regions were the most densely settled districts in middle or later Saxon times had, of course, the necessary corollary that 'woodland' districts were the reverse. They were areas in which population levels were low and reserves of woodland and grazing abundant. The argument that they were sparsely settled, frontier country in Saxon times is, in fact, a long-established alternative to the ethnic model, appearing for example in W. G. Hoskins's discussions of the landscape of Hertfordshire and Essex in *Making of the English Landscape*.<sup>38</sup> The scattered settlements and isolated farms were easily interpreted as the homes of late Saxon or post-Conquest pioneers, advancing slowly and painfully out from the well-settled champion lands; and the woods and commons which were often important components of these landscapes could just as easily be interpreted as the tattered remnants of the virgin forest. Such ideas were given clarity and precision by Brian Roberts and Stuart Wrathmell in the publications arising

<sup>35</sup> Dodgshon, *British Field Systems*.

<sup>36</sup> C. Lewis et al., *Village, Hamlet and Field*, p. 199.

<sup>37</sup> G. Cadman and G. Foard, 'Raunds: Manorial and Village Origins', in M. Faull (ed.), *Studies in Late Anglo-Saxon Settlement* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 81–100.

<sup>38</sup> W. G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (London, 1955), p. 92.

from their careful mapping of English settlement patterns.<sup>39</sup> They argued that the evidence of both Domesday Book and place-names suggested that the Central Province, in which the most nucleated settlement patterns could be found, had already been largely cleared of woodland by the start of the Saxon period. It represented a long-settled tract which, they argued, would have experienced the kind of resource-crisis envisaged by Thirsk earlier than the more forested and pastoral districts to the south-east, and west.<sup>40</sup>

Most historians and archaeologists working in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first thus adopted fairly straightforward, essentially positivist approaches to the problem of landscape variation, believing that demographic, economic and tenorial factors generated the pattern of regions in early-medieval England, and especially the difference between 'woodland' and champion areas. But a minority of researchers have recently proposed explanations which are more social in character, returning in some ways to the ethnic models of the past. Steve Rippon has argued, eloquently and persuasively, that some of the regional variations in the medieval landscape may have roots extending back into the Romano-British period, and represent a late manifestation of deep-rooted cultural divisions;<sup>41</sup> while Martin and Satchell concluded their volume on the medieval field systems of greater East Anglia with the suggestion that

Although there were undoubtedly earlier, underlying, cultural and natural factors that contributed to the evolution of the different farming systems . . . the correlation with the evidence for Scandinavian settlement or influence is also compelling. Breaks in established social patterns, and a new or strengthened concept of equitable sharing of the better land, would seem to have triggered the development of common fields.<sup>42</sup>

Rather different are approaches which are essentially post-modern in character, and which argue that the distribution of different kinds of landscape is essentially random and the consequence of autonomous social factors. Christopher Taylor has thus suggested that nucleated villages and cooperative farming systems were simply a fashion which began (perhaps) in the East Midlands and then spread outwards, before fading out at essentially arbitrary boundaries.<sup>43</sup>

The 'village moment' . . . ceased in the 12th century, after which few villages were created. The 'frontier' therefore marks the arbitrary point at which the process of new creation ended. As it was arbitrary, there is no correlation between the distribution of nucleated and dispersed settlement and other features such as geology, soils, topography, tenure, and social make-up.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Roberts and Wrathmell, *Atlas of Rural Settlement*; Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and Place*.

<sup>40</sup> B. K. Roberts and S. Wrathmell, 'Peoples of Wood and Plain: An Exploration of National and Local Regional Contrasts', in D. Hooke (ed.), *Landscape: The Richest Historical Record* (London, 2000), pp. 85–96.

<sup>41</sup> Rippon, *Beyond the Medieval Village*.

<sup>42</sup> Martin and Satchell, *Where Most Enclosures Be*, p. 227.

<sup>43</sup> C. Taylor, 'Nucleated Settlement: A View from the Frontier', *Landscape History* 24 (2002), pp. 53–71, at pp. 53–4.

<sup>44</sup> C. Taylor, 'Chrishall Grange, Fowlmere: A Settlement in Eight Landscapes', *Proceedings of the*

In a slightly different way, Richard Jones has argued that the boundaries of landscape regions were the consequence of numerous separate choices made by individuals in the early Middle Ages about how to live, apparently unaffected by variations in the physical environment, and again with boundaries largely or entirely arbitrary and unpredictable in character.<sup>45</sup>

### *Reification and regions*

Much of the debate about the character of regional landscapes in medieval England has tended, implicitly or explicitly, to focus on the dichotomy between 'woodland' and champion regions, but in some ways this is misleading. As others have noted, these are over-used and simplistic terms which in reality each embrace a range of different landscapes.<sup>46</sup> But other systems of broad regional classification employed by historians and others also usually represent oversimplifications, for on close inspection regions often dissolve into a multiplicity of more local landscape types. To take the most obvious example, the Central Province of Roberts and Wrathmell was not entirely or continuously a region of villages and regular field systems. Districts of more dispersed settlement, often extensive, could also be found there. Some corresponded to areas of royal forest, such as Whittlewood or Bernwood, but they were by no means restricted to such legally defined zones. Roberts and Wrathmell themselves drew attention to the 'south-eastern angle' of the Central Province, comprising central and southern Huntingdonshire, north Bedfordshire and much of western Cambridgeshire, describing it as a 'sub-province in which a mixture of "Central" and "south-eastern" – "champion" and "woodland" – characteristics appear'.<sup>47</sup> There were large numbers of isolated moated sites, some manorial but many not, outlying farms and hamlets with names featuring the terms 'green' and 'end', and villages ranged around extensive commons or displaying markedly irregular forms, featuring several semi-detached elements which were likewise termed 'ends' (Figure 21).<sup>48</sup> Field systems in this district also deviated, perhaps unsurprisingly, from the champion norm, and were broadly similar to the more complex arrangements generally found in many 'woodland' areas. Thurleigh in Bedfordshire thus had eleven distinct open fields when the parish was enclosed in 1805, farmed from a multiplicity of hamlets and isolated farms;<sup>49</sup> neighbouring

*Cambridgeshire Antiquarian Society* 94 (2006), pp. 127–46, at p. 143.

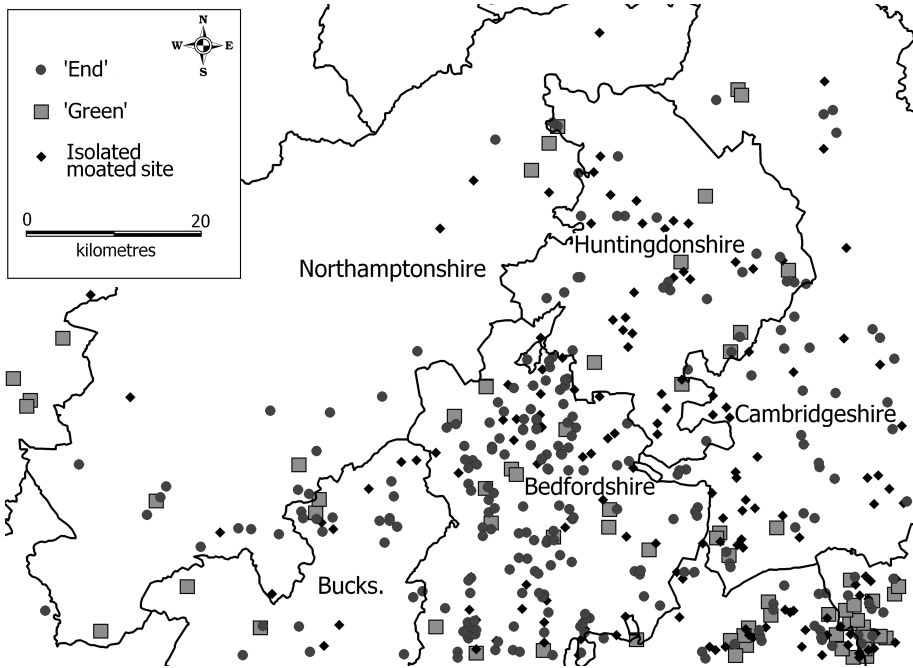
<sup>45</sup> R. Jones and M. Page, *Medieval Villages in an English Landscape: Beginnings and Ends* (Macclesfield, 2006), pp. 240–2; R. Jones, 'The Village and the Butterfly: Nucleation out of Chaos and Complexity' *Landscapes* 11 (1) (2011), pp. 25–46.

<sup>46</sup> Lewis *et al.*, *Village, Hamlet and Field*, p. 62.

<sup>47</sup> Roberts and S. Wrathmell, 'Dispersed Settlement in England', p. 102.

<sup>48</sup> A. E. Brown and C. C. Taylor, 'The Origins of Dispersed Settlement: Some Results from Bedfordshire', *Landscape History* 11 (1989), pp. 61–82; S. Oosthuizen, 'Medieval Greens and Moats in the Central Province: Evidence from the Bourne Valley, Cambridgeshire', *Landscape History* 24 (2002), pp. 73–87; S. Coleman, 'Moats in Bedfordshire and the Monuments Protection Programme', *Medieval Settlement Research Group Annual Report* 4 (1989), pp. 25–6.

<sup>49</sup> Brown and Taylor, 'The Origins of Dispersed Settlement', p. 62.

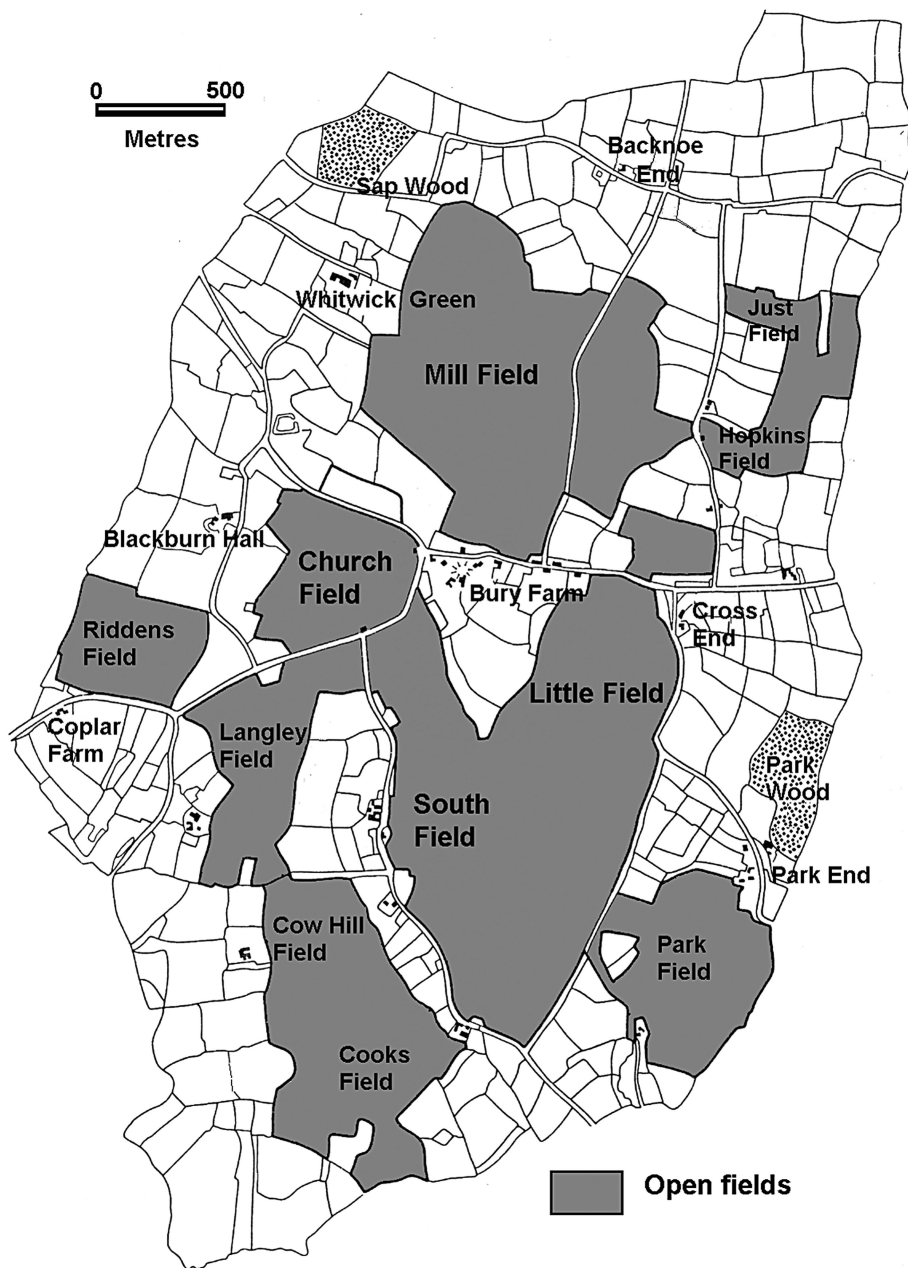


**Figure 21.** Dispersed settlement in the south-east Midlands. Although lying well within the champion region of Midland England, isolated moated sites and small hamlets (called 'Greens' or 'Ends') are a common feature of the landscape of this extensive district, while villages are often only loosely nucleated, with one of or semi-detached and separately named 'Ends'. Source: First Edition Ordnance Survey 6": 1 mile maps. The denser concentration of symbols in the far south-east of the map marks the beginning of the 'woodland' proper, in north-east Hertfordshire and north-west Essex.

Ridlington had seven; while Colmworth in the same county had no less than forty-nine named fields in the fifteenth century (Figure 22).<sup>50</sup> Even today this extensive tract of countryside resembles the landscape of 'woodland' Essex more than the surrounding, conventionally champion districts.

It is also important to emphasise how the boundaries of major landscape regions have been defined in different ways by different scholars. One such ambiguous region comprises the chalklands of Wessex and their extension to the south-east along the South Downs. Roberts and Wrathmell excluded these districts from their Central Province on the basis that large numbers of small hamlets, as well as nucleated settlements, were clustered in the principal valleys cutting through the chalk, or scattered along springlines at its margins. But these settlements often farmed highly regular field systems, and so Gray considered the southern chalklands as a part of the region characterised by

<sup>50</sup> F. G. Emmison, *Type of Open-Field Parishes in the Midlands* (London, 1937), p. 7.



**Figure 22.** Thurleigh, Bedfordshire, showing dispersed settlements and irregular fields at the time of enclosure. Thurleigh lies in Bedfordshire, but only 10 kilometres from the county boundary with Northamptonshire, in the heart of the ‘champion’ Midlands. Nevertheless, like neighbouring parishes, it has a landscape more reminiscent of the ‘woodland’ regions of Essex (after A. E. Brown and C. Taylor, ‘The Origins of Dispersed Settlement’).

his Midland system, and subsequent studies have confirmed that these areas did indeed boast extensive areas of open arable, often organised into two or three fields, albeit with large tracts of common grazing on the higher and thinner soils of the surrounding downland (Figure 19).<sup>51</sup> As was normal on light lands, the open fields remained largely intact until they were enclosed – together with most of the open downs – in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ensuring that some, although not all, of this district is included by Rackham as part of his ‘predominantly planned countryside’.<sup>52</sup>

Other regions of England have a similarly uncertain, ambiguous status. The maps produced by Roberts and Wrathmell for their *Atlas of Rural Settlement* clearly indicate that the western parts of East Anglia displayed levels of settlement dispersion, and of nucleation, similar to those of the Midlands: yet the region is specifically excluded from their Central Province (Figure 19). As Loverre has recently commented, ‘elements of Roberts and Wrathmell’s south-eastern province – parts of Wiltshire and Hampshire, as well as Cambridgeshire and Western Norfolk and Suffolk – have more in common with the Central Province than with the rest of the south-east’.<sup>53</sup> Gray was also confident that the latter areas lay outside the broad region characterised by his Midland system. Yet early topographers repeatedly refer to this part of East Anglia as being champion land, in contrast to the ‘woodland’ districts found on the heavier or more fertile ground to the east: Sir Henry Spelman in the early seventeenth century, while noting that most of Norfolk was ‘woodland’ countryside, thus emphasised that ‘the parts from *Thetford* to *Burneham*, and thence Westward, as also along the coast, be counted *Champion*’.<sup>54</sup> Rackham similarly included the whole of western and northern Norfolk, and much of north-west Suffolk, within his planned countryside, for the open fields and commons of the district, including the vast heaths of Breckland, generally survived until parliamentary enclosure in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In large measure, such differences of opinion simply result from the fact that the settlements and fields of this region do not fit neatly into any simple dichotomous classification. Villages in western East Anglia were often sprawling and irregular in character, sometimes resembling a loose cluster of hamlets (each often focused on a small green) rather than a village in the normal Midland sense. More complex is the question of the fields which were farmed from such places. Gray, and subsequently Postgate, excluded this district from the Midlands because its fields supposedly exhibited distinctive regional characteristics which defined a different East Anglian system, which was shared with other parts of Norfolk and Suffolk. In this, the holdings of

<sup>51</sup> C. Taylor, *The Making of the English Landscape: Dorset* (London, 1970), pp. 53, 86–8; E. Critall, *Victoria County History of Wiltshire*, vol. X: *Swanborough Hundred* (London, 1975), *passim*; C. R. Elvington, *Victoria County History of Wiltshire*, vol. XIII: *Chalke Hundred* (London, 1987), *passim*.

<sup>52</sup> Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> A. G. Loverre, ‘The Atlas of Rural Settlement GIS’, *Landscapes* 11, 2 (2010), pp. 21–44, at p. 36.

<sup>54</sup> J. Arlott, *John Speed’s England* (London, 1953), pp. f.35–6.



individual farmers lay clustered, in particular parts of the open fields, rather than being extensively and thoroughly intermingled, as in Midland vills. The fields were managed under a regime which featured a discontinuous pattern of cropping 'shifts' (rather than a small number of large and continuous 'fields') which in part arose from this; and an institution called the 'fold course', by which the various manorial lords within a township (most East Anglian townships were multi-manorial) retained control of the sheep flocks, which allegedly allowed them to monopolise the intensive night-folding, thus ensuring that a disproportionate amount of the 'tathe' or manure was received by the demesne.

In fact, it is very doubtful whether any of these features were ever standard and ubiquitous in East Anglia, and while the fold course was widespread in these western districts by the sixteenth century there are good grounds for believing that it did not exist as a well-developed institution in early-medieval times, when freehold tenants, and many others, seem to have enjoyed the right to erect folds on their own land:<sup>55</sup> the seigniorial monopoly of folding was probably a development of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. More importantly, the clustered patterns of holdings which Gray and Postgate believed were typical of East Anglia as a whole were only, and perhaps not surprisingly, evident in areas where the settlement pattern was dispersed: that is, in the 'woodland' districts lying in the south and east of the region. In western Norfolk and north-west Suffolk, in contrast – mainly a district of chalk and sand, but including some areas of heavy clay beside the Fens – fields seem, in many respects, to have resembled those of the Midlands. It is true that field nomenclature was often rather different, with multiple named fields and, in some cases, the description of lands in terms of units called *quarentena*, which appear to have had little if any agricultural significance. But while there is little evidence for the highly regular distribution of lands found in many Midland townships there is certainly little evidence for the clustering of holdings in particular sections of the fields. Admittedly, many of the relevant sources are of late or post-medieval date, but it seems unlikely that evolution, or reorganisation, of concentrated holdings towards a more scattered, intermixed pattern would often have occurred. On the light Newmarket Association soils of north-west Norfolk, in parishes like Snettisham for example, the holdings of the tenants, as well as those of the individual manors into which the township was divided, were spread evenly across the fields: the demesne land, as was usual in Midland vills, was generally intermingled with that of tenants, rather than forming a consolidated block.<sup>56</sup> Further south, in the sandy, arid region of Breckland, as Mark Bailey has demonstrated, the holdings were usually scattered evenly across the town-

<sup>55</sup> M. Bailey, 'Sand into Gold: The Evolution of the Fold Course System in West Suffolk, 1200–1600' *Agricultural History Review* 38 (1990), pp. 40–57.

<sup>56</sup> G. Watt, 'Open Field and Enclosure: The Origins and Disappearance of Open Fields in Snettisham, West Norfolk', unpublished MA dissertation, University of East Anglia, 2002, p. 30.

ship, with little clear evidence of clustering.<sup>57</sup> Nor were such arrangements limited to light soils, calcareous or acidic. Michael Medlar has examined the field books and maps relating to the parishes of Shouldham, Shouldham Thorpe and Fincham, largely occupying heavy Beccles and Burlingham Association clay soils on the edge of the Fens in south-west Norfolk. Ignoring the holdings of very small and very large owners, Medlar showed that in the seventeenth century holdings were 'distributed across the four principal fields of each parish'.<sup>58</sup> In Fincham for example:

Henry Camplin of Fincham owned 21a[cres] 2r[oods] op[erches] of which 4a or 2op were in East Field, 4a 2r op in Langholme Field, 5a 3r op in North Field, and 7a or 2op in South Field; while Thomas Nicolls possessed 62a 2r 3op of open-field arable, also in Fincham, with 14a or 10p in east Field, 18a 1r op in Langholme Field, 15a 1r 2op in North Field and 13a op or in South Field. The situation in Shouldham was similar, with William Whisker owning 4a 1r 2op in Abbey Field, 5a or 2op in Chalkpit Field, 9a 3r and op in Chapel Field and 8a or op in Shullygate Field.<sup>59</sup>

Similar even spreads of property were apparent in Shouldham Thorpe, where for example Richard Laite owned 5 acres in East Field, 8 in North Field, 7 acres and 30 perches in South Field and 8 acres, 1 rood and 20 perches in West Field.<sup>60</sup>

It might be possible to dismiss western East Anglia as some kind of border region, between the 'real' 'woodland' and champion. Yet this was no brief transitional zone but a distinct landscape region covering some 5,000 square kilometres. There are thus dangers in assuming that England can be divided into a small number of regional landscape types, and confusions and disagreements over regional boundaries reflect the resistance of reality to being squeezed into the neat classifications of academics. Moreover, as the case of Bedfordshire and western Cambridgeshire clearly demonstrates, exceptions and anomalies often occupy such extensive areas of ground that they undermine, if not invalidate, the definitions of the regions within which they lie. As Andrew Louverre, discussing the *Atlas of Rural Settlement* produced by Roberts and Wrathmell, astutely observed: 'Uncritical use of Roberts and Wrathmell's settlement regions can invite a tacit assumption of homogeneity within those regions'.<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

In the discussion earlier in this chapter of the various explanations which have been advanced by landscape historians and others for regional variations

<sup>57</sup> M. Bailey, *A Marginal Economy? East Anglian Breckland in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 41.

<sup>58</sup> M. Medlar, 'Land Ownership and Land Use in South-West Norfolk c. 1625–c. 1840', unpublished MA dissertation, University of East Anglia, 2001, p. 23.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>61</sup> Louverre, 'Atlas of Rural Settlement GIS', p. 30.

in settlement patterns and field systems, I arguably simplified the complex historiography of this fascinating subject, ignoring some important contributions (such as those of the Orwins, or Eric Kerridge)<sup>62</sup> and skating briefly over others, most notably perhaps those made in the early 1980s by Robert Dodgshon.<sup>63</sup> This was mainly because the opinions of most landscape historians on these matters currently veer towards one or another broad consensus. The majority view holds that the differences between 'woodland' and champion landscapes, or between other defined types of regional countryside in medieval England, can be explained in terms of demographic and tenurial factors. Nucleated villages and regular open fields emerged in the later Saxon period as a response to a resource crisis caused by relative overpopulation, as a consequence of the development of manorial economies, or both. 'Woodland' districts, in contrast, were less densely settled and/or less lordly in character. Against this is a bundle of loosely related views, still a minority perhaps but growing in acceptance and influence, which insists that spatial variations in the landscape are in fact largely social in character, the result of continuity and invasions, or of fashion, choice and chance, and that their boundaries are thus essentially arbitrary in character, unrelated to soils, topography or any other aspect of the natural environment.

Either way, most of the approaches adopted to the explanation of regional landscape variation begin with the assumption that there are a relatively small number of clearly definable regions which need to be explained. But simplicity of classification allows for a simplicity of causation, especially in terms of social, tenurial or cultural factors, for a continuous and homogeneous tract of countryside is more easily explained in terms of the imprint of an ancient invasion, for example, or the diffusion of a fashion, than a complex, discontinuous one. As we have seen, things on the ground appear to have been more complicated than this. There were many varieties of landscape, often interdigitated in complex ways, and on close inspection few regions display a high degree of homogeneity. Attempts to force the reality of landscape into bounded regions, divorced from the subtlety and complexity of soils and topography, hinders more than it helps our understanding of the past.

<sup>62</sup> C. S. Orwin and C. S. Orwin, *The Open Fields* (Oxford, 1938); E. Kerridge, *The Common Fields of England* (Manchester, 1992).

<sup>63</sup> Dodgshon, *British Field Systems*.

## Village, Farm and Field

### *Core and marginal lands*

Many explanations for the divergence of 'woodland' and champion landscapes begin from the assumption that the latter represent the core areas of early settlement, denuded of woods and pastures and densely populated by later Saxon times, while the former were characterised by lower population densities, and by extensive tracts of woodland and grazing. These features ensured that 'woodland' districts did not experience the kind of resource crisis envisaged by Thirsk, and the consequent reorganisation of settlement into nucleated villages and of the arable land into extensive, regular open fields. The settlement patterns of such districts remained dispersed, and became more so in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Yet one of the most remarkable aspects of the debates about regional landscapes is that while such assumptions are endlessly repeated, accepted as fact by many researchers, there is remarkably little evidence to support them. Domesday Book, while it must be used with caution, leaves little doubt that the most densely settled areas of England in late Saxon times, in East Anglia, were not characterised by champion landscapes at all, while the latter correspond, for the most part, with districts which Domesday suggests boasted only moderate population densities, or even densities which were well below the national average (compare Figures 4 and 19). Many 'woodland' districts, especially in the west of the country, were clearly areas of low population density: tracts of damp clayland, of the kind described by Higham in Cheshire, in which the arable acreage remained limited.<sup>1</sup> But many were densely settled in late Saxon times, and continued to be characterised by particularly high population levels right through the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup>

The suggestion that champion districts necessarily had more land in cultivation than 'woodland' ones is equally hard to sustain when we examine them at a local level. Many of the areas of medieval England which were characterised by nucleated settlement lay on light land, on chalk and sands. Indeed, almost all of the early evidence for the existence of extensive open fields come from these kinds of terrain, as at Charlton in Berkshire in 956, where it

<sup>1</sup> N. J. Higham, 'Patterns of Settlement in Medieval Cheshire: An Insight into Dispersed Settlement', *Annual Report of the Medieval Settlement Research Group* 2 (1987), pp. 9–10.

<sup>2</sup> Dyer, *Hanbury*, pp. 60–1; Taylor, *Village and Farmstead*, p. 175.

was written that 'the said country is not surrounded by fixed limits, but the acres lie next to acres'.<sup>3</sup> But in most of these places, as indeed at Charlton, large areas of unploughed ground also existed right through the Middle Ages, and in some cases still survive to this day, as open downs or heaths, largely because of the need to maintain large folding flocks, in the manner described earlier (pp. 130–2). In south Cambridgeshire villages like Fowlmere, Thriplow, Sawston or Stapleford possessed, even at the time of enclosure in the early nineteenth century, open heaths, low-lying moors and unploughed areas within the open fields amounting on average to around a quarter of their surface area;<sup>4</sup> even practising a three-course rotation only half the land was in tilth each year, the rest being used as grazing. Nucleated settlements, cultivating arable land entirely organised into open fields, dominated the landscape of the East Anglian Breckland, where 40 or even 50 per cent of the land area was commonly given over to heathland and pasture in medieval times.

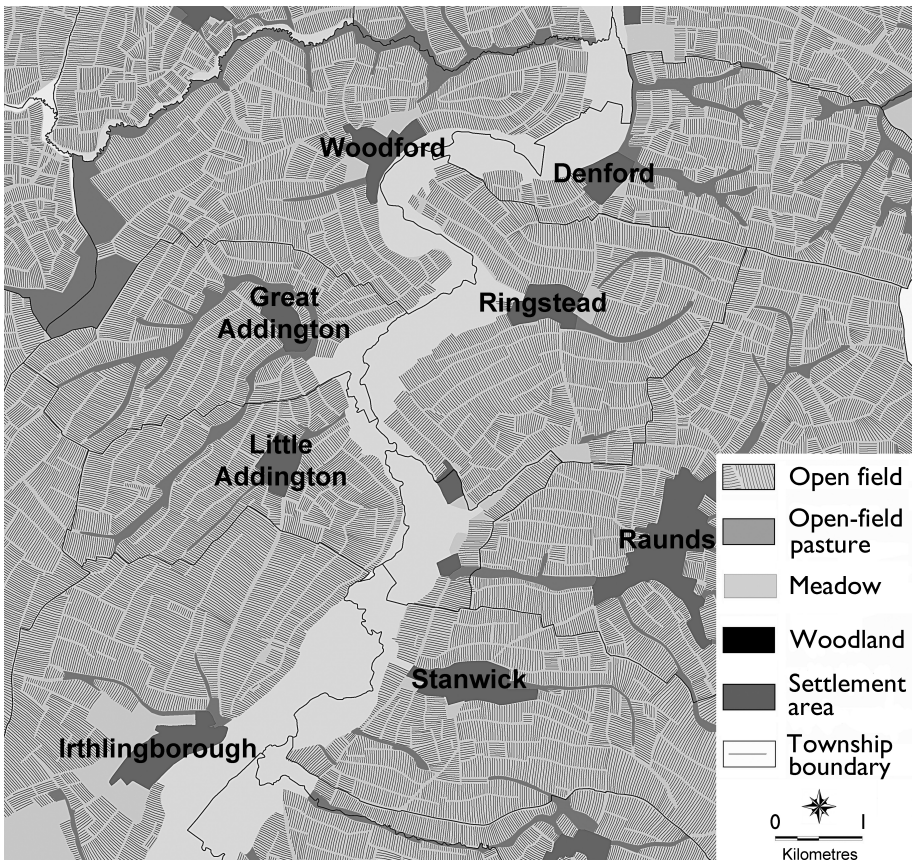
Even in the clayland Midlands, where intense folding was less necessary (because impermeable land held nutrients better) and potentially harmful (the treading of large numbers of closely penned sheep could impact and damage the structure of the soil) the landscape did not always consist of the unrelieved arable which we often encounter in textbooks, largely because some areas were so badly affected by seasonal waterlogging that they did not repay cultivation. Recent research in Northamptonshire has enabled the entire layout of the medieval landscape to be reconstructed as it was in c. 1300, using documentary and in particular archaeological evidence, most notably the distribution of ridge and furrow.<sup>5</sup> This enables us to see not only the extent of arable, but also the location and configuration of unploughed ground. In some areas 80 or even 90 per cent of the land was in tilth, mainly on the lighter clays in major valleys in the drier south-east of the county, or on exposures of limestone in the north-east. In the valley of the River Nene in particular there was little pasture, and furlong succeeded furlong across the gentle slopes, interrupted only occasionally by a minor watercourse or 'slade' with its attendant strip of grassland (Figure 23). Such places provide powerful support for the Thirsk model. But on heavier soils, especially those of the Lias clays in the west, the situation was often very different. Here the open fields featured numerous bands and ribbons of pasture, corresponding with steep slopes and damp areas, where spring ploughing was problematic (Figure 24). Evidently, as cultivation had expanded it did so by leap-frogging difficult areas. At a later stage, as pressure on land increased, many of these may well have been revisited, and ploughed: but many remained. The pattern of furlongs was correspondingly irregular, with peninsulas and islands of ploughed ground projecting into the damp pastures. In villages like Badby or Fawsley less than 60 per cent of the land area was cultivated in c. 1300, which means – given that a two-course rotation was practised – that little

<sup>3</sup> Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, no. 925; M. Gelling, *The Early Charters of the Thames Valley* (Leicester, 1979), p. 44; D. Hooke, *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England* (Leicester, 1998), p. 121.

<sup>4</sup> Wittering, 'Enclosure in South Cambridgeshire', pp. 51–2, 69.

<sup>5</sup> Williamson, Liddiard and Partida, *Champion*.





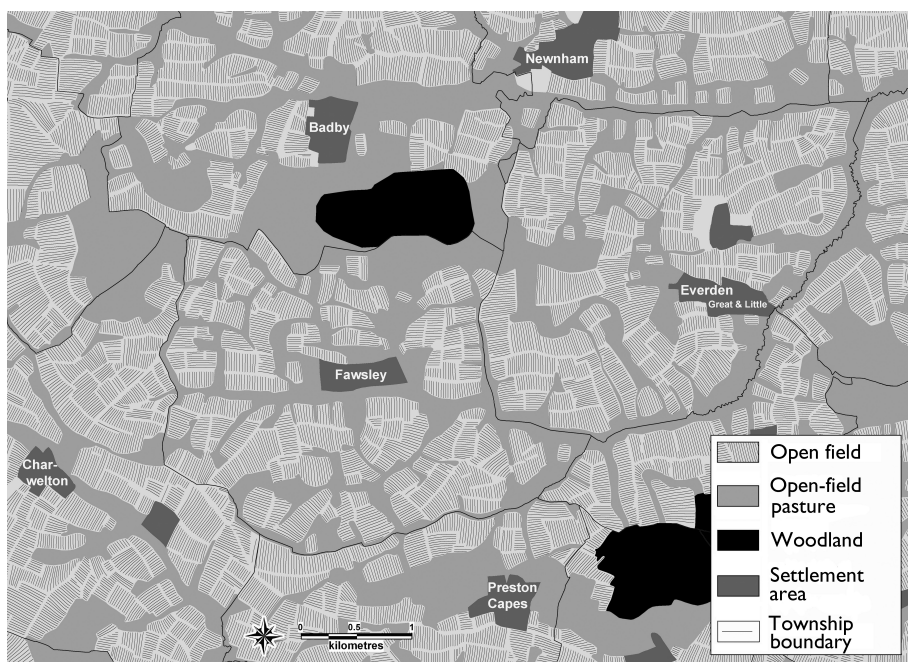
**Figure 23.** The landscape of eastern Northamptonshire, around the River Nene, in the Middle Ages. Planar topography, relatively low rainfall and soils formed in boulder clay ensured a near-continuous furlong pattern, interrupted by only a few, narrow ribbons of pasture.

more than a quarter of the land was being cropped each year, and this at the height of the medieval population expansion.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, documentary sources indicate that even where the area of pasture within Midland townships was more limited, alternative sources of grazing were often available to farmers. Apart from the larger tracts of woodland and wood-pasture represented by royal forests like Salcey, Bernwood and Rockingham, which were usually intercommoned by numerous communities, including some that were located several kilometres away, many Midland townships lay close to the extensive tracts of grazing provided by the Fens to the east, the woods of Arden and the uplands of the Cotswolds to the west. Even in late-medieval (or post-medieval) times rights to use such distant grazing grounds sometimes survived. Moreover, the great Midland rivers like the

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 109–10, 189–90.



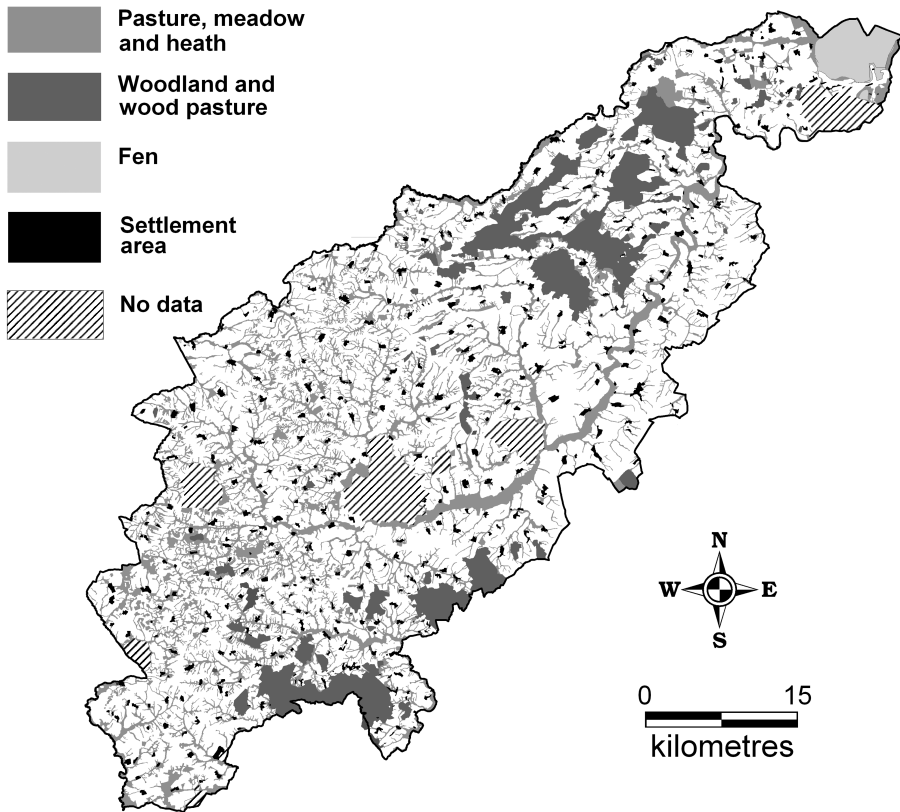


**Figure 24.** The landscape of western Northamptonshire in the Middle Ages. Broken topography, seepage lines and areas of intractable soils formed in Jurassic mudstones ensured numerous areas of unploughed ground and a complex, indented furlong pattern.

Nene and the Ouse had wide floodplains, which, although closed for grazing during the hay-growing season, provided extensive tracts of rich pasture after mid-summer. So great were these areas of unploughed ground that even in Northamptonshire, perhaps the archetypical champion county, probably only around two-thirds of the total land area was under cultivation even at the very height of the medieval population expansion in *c.* 1300 (Figure 25). Given that most early-medieval communities in the county appear to have practised a two-course rotation, little more than a third of the land area was cropped each year.

In the face of such evidence it seems a little perverse to argue that the development of the champion landscapes was driven primarily by a shortage of grazing.<sup>7</sup> But we should also perhaps note that the argument that champion landscapes developed as a way of solving the problem of limited reserves of grazing, in a landscape of intermixed strips, also displays a certain basic theoretical illogicality. If the problems which farmers faced arose primarily from intermingled properties, it seems strange that the chosen solution would be a wholesale reorganisation of the landscape to create a *greater* degree of intermixture. The landscape could just as easily have been replanned to create a number of discrete, ring-fence farms – a course of action which would have

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 189–91.



**Figure 25.** Northamptonshire lies in the heart of the champion Midlands. In the Middle Ages its settlement pattern consisted almost exclusively of nucleated villages and the overwhelming majority of its arable land lay in open fields. Yet large areas of unploughed ground – fen, forest, meadow and pasture ‘ribbons’ within the open fields – survived here, even in c.1300, and only around two-thirds of the land was under the plough.

necessitated less, if any, reorganisation of the pattern of settlement itself, assuming that this had, indeed, been of a dispersed character up to this point.

### *The antiquity of ‘woodland’ settlement*

The corollary of the view of champion areas as intensively settled core districts is that ‘woodland’ landscapes were marginal and late-settled, a supposition apparently supported in many cases by their appearance. I have already noted how Hoskins and others have interpreted the numerous areas of ancient, semi-natural woodland found in many ‘woodland’ districts as the tattered remnants of once continuous woods, out of which the scattered farms in the surrounding countryside had been cut. Hoskins memorably described the landscape around Bishops Stortford in Hertfordshire, where the

Tangle of lanes and paths winding from one isolated farmstead to another, the score or more of farms named after medieval owners or occupiers . . . and the still-frequent remnants of woodland, are all deeply characteristic of country enclosed direct from former forest.<sup>8</sup>

Hoskins and Stamp similarly interpreted the clusters of houses around small greens encountered in such districts as a consequence of their late-settled, and densely wooded, character:

The numerous small greens of Essex and Kent . . . pretty certainly originated as clearings in densely wooded country, either as natural glades in an old forest or as deliberately cleared ground.<sup>9</sup>

But the survival of woodland in such districts was not simply a function of the fact that these were areas of low population density, economically underdeveloped, so that nobody had ever got around to grubbing up what was left. Many districts which carried extensive woodland at the time of Domesday, and which are still today characterised by much ancient, semi-natural woodland, such as north-west Essex, had at the time of Domesday population densities which were higher than those generally recorded across the champion Midlands. More importantly, while it is easy to assume that the isolated farms and hamlets interspersed with the woods were invariably created by twelfth and thirteenth-century assarting, archaeological evidence often indicates an earlier origin. In some districts it is possible that a proportion of these outlying sites, well away from parish churches and the principal villages, may have had Romano-British origins. In Rivenhall in central Essex, for example, 'not only is the principal manor on the site of a villa but the subsidiary manors are also related to Roman sites'; while in the north-west of the same county many medieval hamlets and manorial sites lie close to Romano-British settlements.<sup>10</sup> But it is usually hard to prove that such coincidence does not represent reoccupation of favourable sites, and in the overwhelming majority of cases dispersed farms and hamlets clearly originated in the early Middle Ages, although often rather earlier than is usually assumed.

In the Norfolk clayland parish of Fransham, for example, Andrew Rogerson has shown that farms were already appearing on the margins of the greens and commons (most of which survived until enclosure in the nineteenth century) well before the Norman Conquest, in some cases in the tenth century; Addington has found similar evidence in parishes on the heavy-clay plateau in the south of the same county; while Warner has argued for the pre-Conquest origins of greenside settlement in east Suffolk.<sup>11</sup> In many dis-

<sup>8</sup> Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape*, p. 92.

<sup>9</sup> W. G. Hoskins and L. Dudley Stamp, *The Common Lands of England and Wales* (London, 1963), p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Rodwell and Rodwell, *Rivenhall*, p. 179; T. Williamson, 'The Development of Settlement in North-West Essex: The Results of a Recent Field Survey', *Essex Archaeology and History* 17 (1986), pp. 120–32.

<sup>11</sup> Rogerson, 'Fransham', pp. 105, 108, 111; S. Addington, 'Landscape and Settlements in South Norfolk', *Norfolk Archaeology* 38 (1982), pp. 97–139; Warner, *Greens, Commons and Clayland*

tracts, however, where early and middle Saxon pottery is less abundant and/or settlement has exhibited more continuity since medieval times, so that early occupation is obscured by houses, gardens and paddocks, we have to rely more on documentary evidence. And as Taylor has emphasised, the appearance of such places in the documentary record is largely a matter of chance, dependent upon the history of local tenurial and territorial structures.<sup>12</sup> One small farm or hamlet might be mentioned in a charter, in Domesday Book or some other early source because it formed a separate property or taxable unit, while its neighbour, which was included in some larger estate, was passed over in silence. Isolated moated sites, lying close to parish boundaries in areas of heavy clay, are usually assumed to be of post-Conquest origins – additions to the settlement pattern created by twelfth or thirteenth-century assarting.<sup>13</sup> The isolated moated manor of Yen Hall, on the boulder clays in the north of West Wickham in the ‘woodland’ landscapes of south-east Cambridgeshire, close to woods and the parish boundary, looks like a typical example: but *Eanheale* is mentioned in a charter of 974, and this in turn raises questions about the antiquity of the other isolated farms, moated or otherwise, in this and adjacent parishes.<sup>14</sup>

Place-names can provide useful clues to settlement chronology, although they need to be treated with caution. Many isolated farms and hamlets in ‘woodland’ districts have names which contain Old English elements, strongly suggesting that they had come into existence before the shift to Middle English which took place from the early twelfth century. However, a significant proportion of these are of topographic form – that is, they have suffixes which relate not to settlements but to natural features such as valleys or hills. It is thus possible that a settlement newly established in the twelfth or thirteenth century simply assumed a local district name which was already several centuries old. This said, some of these places represent settlements unquestionably established by the tenth century. The obscure hamlet of Cockernhoe, for example – the first element of uncertain significance, but the second meaning ‘hill’ – in the Hertfordshire parish of Offley in the eastern Chilterns, is first explicitly mentioned in a document of 1221. But a single chance reference shows that it had then been in existence for more than 250 years, for the will of Æthelgifu, drawn up around 970, ordered that, after her death, a slave called ‘Wulfstan of Cockernhoe’ was to be freed.<sup>15</sup> Hamlets and isolated farmsteads bearing Old English habitative names – that is, with elements which refer specifically to a settlement (such as -ton, -wic and the like) are probably more reliable as indicators of early settlement, and some of these – passed over by Domesday – do feature in early charters and

*Colonization*, pp. 17–18.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, *Village and Farmstead*, pp. 175–82, 192.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.; F. W. Emery, ‘Moated Settlements in England’, *Geography* 47 (1968), pp. 378–87.

<sup>14</sup> Blake, *Liber Eliensis*, no. 73. This is not, of course, to imply that the moat itself is of pre-Conquest date.

<sup>15</sup> Gover, Mawer and Stenton, *Place-Names of Hertfordshire*, p. 19; Crick, *Charters of St Albans*, no. 7.

similar documents. A typical example would be Westwick near St Albans in Hertfordshire, the 'west farm', which does not appear in Domesday but is likewise mentioned in Æthelgifu's will and in a charter of 996.<sup>16</sup>

### *The anatomy of 'woodland' landscapes*

Taken together, the evidence of archaeology, documents and place-names leaves no doubt that the simple equation of dispersed settlement and irregular field systems with areas of late colonisation is highly misleading. East Norfolk, as already noted, was one of the most populous and densely settled regions in England at the time of Domesday, although its population grew considerably thereafter, together with the area under arable cultivation. Yet it was characterised in the thirteenth century by a scattered pattern of settlement, and even parish churches often stood alone in the fields, because settlement had migrated to the margins of extensive greens and commons in the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, or to the sides of the roads leading to these. By the twelfth century open fields usually occupied the majority of the cultivated land in a parish but their layout was characterised by 'a pervasive irregularity'.<sup>17</sup> The 'constituent parcels of individual holdings were extremely unevenly distributed', with 'a marked tendency . . . to be concentrated within particular portions of the parish'. Clustered and chaotic holdings did not make for highly communal forms of agriculture: 'communal rotations such as existed in the Midlands, and irregular cropping shifts such as existed in western Norfolk, were both absent from east Norfolk and harvest shack remained the sole common right to which commonfields were subject'.<sup>18</sup> The field systems of the district were chaotic in other ways, with numerous named subdivisions. At Hemsby in 1422 there were almost a hundred, none of which was described as a 'field'. There was no apparent regularity in the size of holdings – nothing even remotely equivalent to the yardlands of Midland vills. Strip size was also very variable, although generally small: there was very little enclosed woodland, or enclosed land of any kind.

East Norfolk is characterised by light and, for the most part, fertile loams, interspersed with areas of more gravelly land. Most areas of dispersed settlement in East Anglia, in contrast, were associated with the boulder-clay plateau, mostly overlying chalk, which extends in a great arc from central Norfolk, through the centre of Suffolk, and into north Essex and east Hertfordshire. Domesday suggests that population densities were particularly dense towards the northern end of the plateau, decreasing gradually towards Essex and Hertfordshire, where they were around average for the country as a whole. In some ways this is the inverse of what we might expect, given that moving south-west the level, poorly draining plateau becomes increasingly dissected, so that wide, level tablelands characterised by the poorly

<sup>16</sup> Crick, *Charters of St Albans*, nos. 7 and 9.

<sup>17</sup> Campbell, 'Extent and Layout of Common Fields', p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.



draining stagnogleys of the Beccles Association are gradually replaced by more undulating terrain in which better-draining clay soils of the Hanslope and Burlingham Associations are interspersed with soils formed in the underlying chalk. But the plateau itself also becomes higher, and wetter, reinforcing the arguments made earlier that early population densities were related less to the character of soils than to climate (pp. 52–3).

The landscapes found in the northern parts of the plateau were similar in some ways to those just described in east Norfolk. But while open fields were generally extensive on the sides of the valleys cutting through the clay plateau, on the wide level interfluvies between them they were usually smaller and interspersed with much enclosed ground, as well as with large tracts of common. These uplands were reclaimed from large tracts of woodland and grazing during the middle and later Saxon times (the strongly co-axial field patterns often found in the district, including the Scole–Dickleburgh system, suggest that the broad tablelands had largely been used as grazing land). By middle Saxon times large numbers of settlements existed in the main valleys, a high proportion of which eventually developed into parishes with their own churches (Norfolk has the highest density of medieval parishes in England) although a few never attained parochial status, such as Middleton or Boyland in Depwade Hundred in Norfolk.<sup>19</sup> But settlement was already spreading out onto the intervening plateau so that some parish churches, associated with spreads of middle Saxon pottery, can also be found there; and by later Saxon times farms were dispersing widely across the tablelands, clustering around the margins of ribbons and blocks of common grazing. In many cases the extent of dispersal, as the uplands were opened up for cultivation, sucked settlement away from existing sites, leaving churches isolated from the farms scattered around greens and commons. In spite of the extent of common land in the district, however, there was surprisingly little woodland, at least by the thirteenth century. What there was, moreover, was mainly concentrated towards the margins of the clay plateau – on the edges of the principal valleys – rather than being scattered more widely across the wide interfluvies, where the main greens and commons could be found, a superficially perplexing pattern.<sup>20</sup>

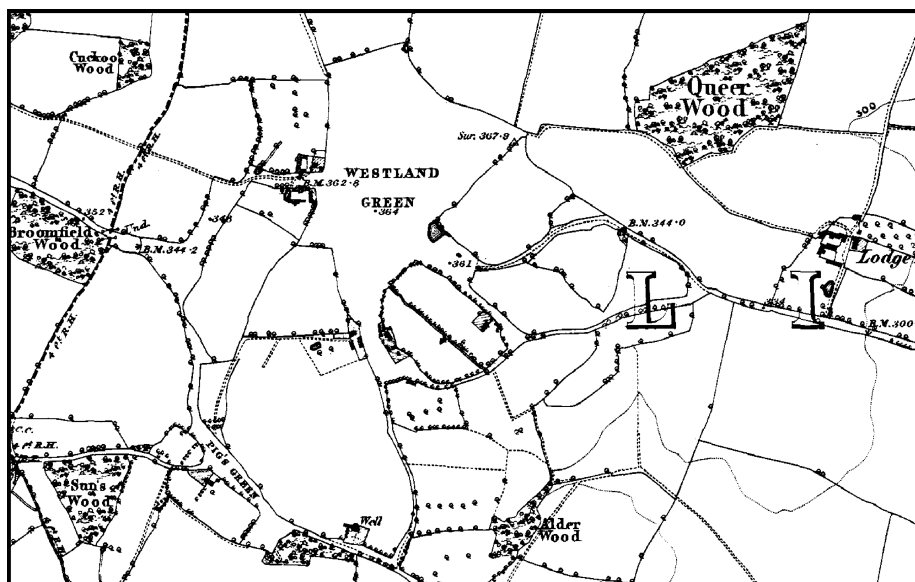
The landscapes towards the south and west of the clay plateau were subtly different and in many ways more typical of ‘ancient countryside’. In eastern Hertfordshire and northern Essex the wide valleys, separated by narrow plateaux, were occupied by extensive and continuous areas of multiple, complex open fields, many of which survived into the nineteenth century. These were farmed from villages on the valley floors, or located on the edges of the plateau above, but also – at least by late Saxon times – by other settlements. In this district Domesday mentions large numbers of diminutive vill

<sup>19</sup> Wade Martins, *Launditch Hundred*; Davison, *The Evolution of Settlement in Three Parishes*; E. Martin, ‘Rural Settlement Patterns in Medieval Suffolk’, *Annual Report of the Medieval Settlement Research Group* 15 (2001), pp. 5–7.

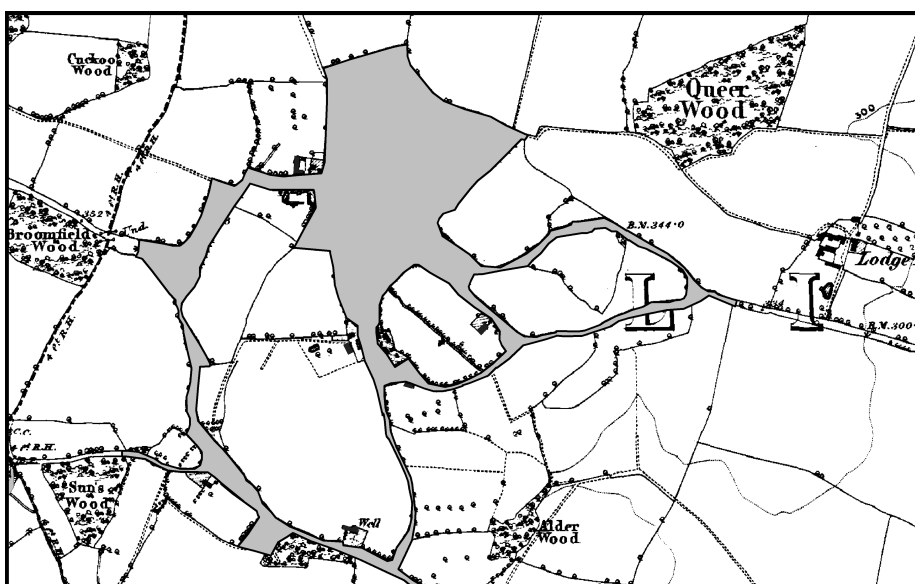
<sup>20</sup> Warner, *Greens, Commons and Clayland Colonisation*; Williamson, *Origins of Norfolk*, pp. 105–36; Addington, ‘Landscape and Settlement in South Norfolk’.



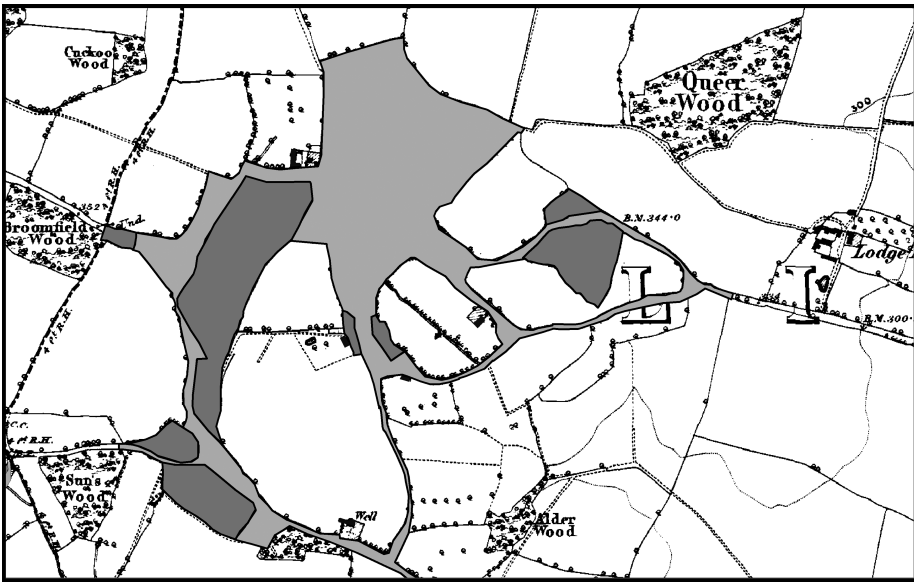
*a*



*b*



- |                                                                                     |                                     |                                                                                     |                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
|  | Commons in the nineteenth century   |  | Woodland destroyed before the late nineteenth century |
|  | Early encroachments                 |  | Medieval deer park                                    |
|  | Woodland in late nineteenth century |  | Original ovoid intakes                                |



c



d

**Figure 26.** Westland Green, Little Hadham, Hertfordshire. Even a cursory inspection shows that Westland and Pigg's Green were once a single block of common grazing (b and c), and further intakes into a once much larger area of common grazing can be identified (c and d). Together with neighbouring areas of ancient woodland, and the former deer park of Little Hadham, this in turn once formed part of a much larger tract of wooded 'waste'.

which never became townships or parishes and which are today normally represented by isolated manorial halls or, more occasionally, by small hamlets (Figure 20). A number of the manorial holdings listed under the larger vill in the district can also be identified with confidence with some of these isolated sites, while the pre-Conquest origins of others is suggested by names which incorporate Old English habitative elements. We do not know the antiquity of these places but the clear implication is that in middle or later Saxon times there were more individual settlement foci, occupied by distinct communities, than was the case further north, where exposures of light soils were restricted to rather narrower ribbons cutting through the plateau. The demesne land of manors located on the edges of the clay plateau was partly dispersed in the valley-side open fields, and partly comprised enclosed parcels – ‘block demesnes’, to use Martin and Satchell’s term – on the adjacent plateau, often farmed by the thirteenth century as huge arable closes, covering upwards of 100 acres (40 hectares).<sup>21</sup> There were also numerous sizeable ring-fence farms clustered at plateau margins, and minor sub-manors. Yet while the edge of the plateau was thus characterised by early settlements and enclosed land, there were also large amounts of woodland so that – given that the plateau itself was more dissected than it is further to the north-east, in East Anglia proper – the countryside was, and remains, much more bosky in appearance. Deer parks, the private wood-pastures created in increasing numbers by manorial lords from the later Saxon period, were also concentrated in many cases towards the plateau margins but, generally covering a larger area than woods, they also often extended far into the interior.

As in north Suffolk and south Norfolk, away from the plateau edges, in the central sections of the principal clay masses, settlement took the form of scatters of farms around the margins of common land. Here, however, the commons themselves were generally smaller, so that settlements mainly comprised small, separate hamlets, clusters of dwellings around pocket-handkerchief greens connected by winding lanes.<sup>22</sup> One useful way of thinking about these plateau landscapes is to consider common land, and public highways, as essentially two versions of the same thing: in Rackham’s words, ‘highways are part of the common land of the manor’.<sup>23</sup> This is clear from the way that roads and commons are not usually physically distinguished with any clarity, the one simply widening or funnelling into the other; and also by the impossibility of distinguishing between a wide road and a linear common. Such an approach helps us to understand complexes of neighbouring greens like those found in the western section of Little Hadham in Hertfordshire (Figure 26), where Westland Green, the smaller Piggs Green and a number of tiny triangles of common land are all connected, in characteristic fashion, by winding roads. Minor encroachments into these areas of common grazing are easily recognised, but closer inspection shows how the various greens

<sup>21</sup> Martin and Satchell, *Where Most Enclosures Be*, pp. 40–5; Hunter, *Field Systems of Essex*, pp. 15–26.

<sup>22</sup> L. Munby, *The Hertfordshire Landscape* (London, 1977), pp. 76–83, 112–16.

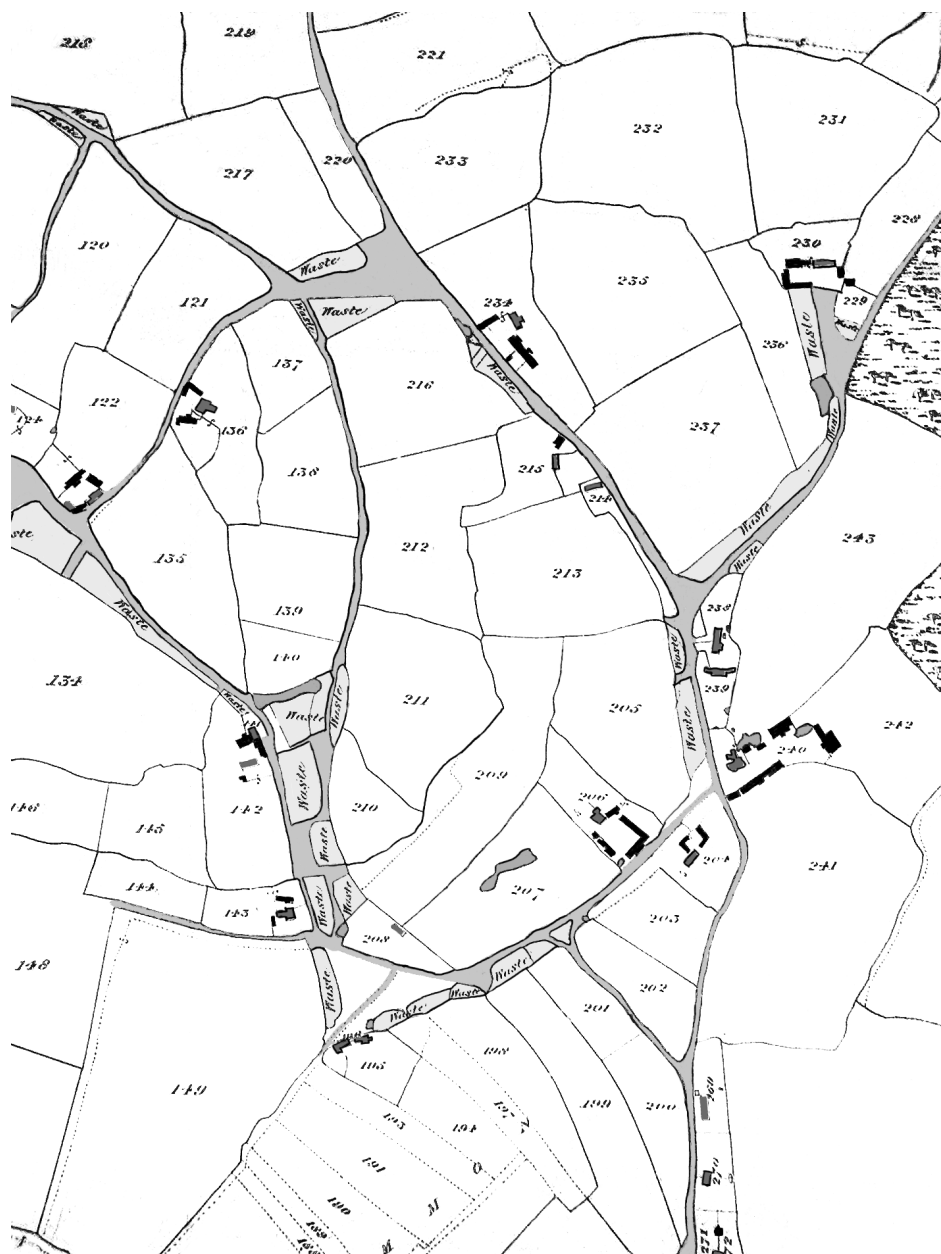
<sup>23</sup> Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, p. 265.

represent the progressive fragmentation of a once much larger and continuous tract by the creation of blocks and ovals of enclosed fields: in the immediate surrounding area, other portions were enclosed to form coppiced woods, and the extensive deer park at Little Hadham. Evidently, as each new farm was established at the expense of the waste it was placed on the edge of the residue of the former common (now sometimes no more than a narrow ribbon of pasture), with its land extending to the rear; the outline of the intake was generally curvilinear in character, presumably to cut down on fencing costs; and – most importantly of all – where an intake was of any serious size a narrow strip of common was left to its rear, running along and fossilising the old common edge, in order to provide access to remaining areas of common grazing, and to farms already established along the common margins, farms which thus came to stand beside a winding lane.

Similar patterns can also be identified further north, in Suffolk and Norfolk, although here, where the plateau is more extensive, the ovoid intakes are themselves often much larger.<sup>24</sup> In many cases, however, these kinds of cell-like patterns – of ovals of farmland, separated by roads and greens – are less obvious because the boundaries of intakes have been structured by the layout of earlier features, especially networks of co-axial tracks. In addition, in all areas the removal of residual areas of common land in late-medieval or post-medieval times by enclosure or piecemeal engrossment has destroyed one of the key features of this kind of development – the direct association of a farmstead with a common edge. At Aston End in north Hertfordshire, for example, the Tithe Award map of 1842 shows how the farms originally fronted on a network of commons but these had been extensively encroached upon, with little strips taken into severalty, leaving only a few places where the road still widened, suddenly, into a small green.<sup>25</sup> Yet the earlier status of many of the intakes was still remembered, the map noting that they were ‘waste’, although now distinct and severed from the adjacent fragments of ‘common’, which were all shaded to distinguish them from the surrounding fields (Figure 27). Such processes have reduced to some extent the contrast between the margins and centres of the clay uplands, but that contrast nevertheless remains clear: between on the one hand a wooded fringe, characterised by manorial halls, many with Saxon origins, and other ring-fence farms, and on the other an inner core with fewer woods but with complex patterns of commons, greens and winding lanes, all created by the fragmentation of once more continuous tracts of common grazing. The contrast is also to an extent blurred by the fact that some of the plateau-edge sites, especially those marked by parish churches, themselves stand on the margins of a village green, which seems to be the remnant of a wide droveway originally linking the settlement to the grazing grounds of the interior, now fragmented, in the manner described, into networks of greens and lanes. In some cases, where upland plateaux were particularly wide, the expansion of settlement into the

<sup>24</sup> Warner, *Greens, Commons and Clayland Colonisation*.

<sup>25</sup> Hertfordshire Archives and Local History, HALS DP9/27/1.



**Figure 27.** Late-medieval and post-medieval encroachments often removed the close association of farms and commons in 'woodland' districts. The Tithe Award map for Aston in Hertfordshire (1840) distinguishes between enclosed land, surviving commons and areas of 'waste', occupied and improved at some unknown time in the past, making it clear that the farms shown all once fronted directly on a network of linear 'greens'. Courtesy Hertfordshire Archives and Local History.

interior was on such a scale that the development of a village around the original focus, marked by the parish church on the edge of the plateau, was suppressed, as was often apparently the case further north, as for example at Sacombe in north Hertfordshire.

I have devoted several pages to describing the complex 'ancient countryside' of the East Anglian boulder clays because they illustrate so well some of the rules which generated the subtle diversity of non-Midland landscapes. Where exposures of light soil were narrow, there were few early settlement foci. But where there was much easily worked land there were often many. Expansion of settlement between the tenth and thirteenth centuries seems initially to have led to a proliferation of further ring-fence farms around the margins of the more amenable arable soils, and subsequently to the opening up of the interiors of clay interfluves, creating the kind of complexes of greens and commons just described. The contrast between fringes and interiors was less marked where the clay uplands, and thus the scale of late Saxon and post-Conquest expansion, were most extensive, but to some extent the distinction is always apparent, and includes two further aspects of critical importance. Firstly, while the interiors were characterised by tracts of common land, the majority of woodland was concentrated towards the plateau margins. Secondly, while early manor and ring-fence farms might, or might not, be placed on the edges of a green or drove giving access to the shrinking network of common pastures, the smaller and later farms almost always appear to have been so located.

Not all 'woodland' landscapes could be found, like those just discussed, in districts of high or average population density. In south-east England, and in the west, many very similar areas of scattered settlements and irregular field systems could be found in sparsely settled districts. In a particularly useful study Christopher Dyer has discussed the case of Pendock in southern Worcestershire, located in an area of loamy and clayey soils over Triassic mudstones characterised by relatively high rainfall levels. In Roman times both settlement and arable land use had been extensive, but by 1066 at least half the area of the parish was occupied by woodland and population levels were low.<sup>26</sup> However, 'in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Pendock was transformed by the extension of cultivation at the expense of woodland and pasture'.<sup>27</sup> Small manors and moated sites proliferated, usually set within their own fields, while the number of peasant holdings increased massively, producing what became a scatter of dwellings in interrupted rows along lanes which, Dyer suggests, 'may have originated as rows of houses on the edge of an open pasture common, like the green edge settlements of East Anglia'.<sup>28</sup> By the thirteenth century cultivated land, comprising a complex mixture of small enclosures and irregular open fields, occupied most of the parish, filling former greens and commons. Yet, in spite of population densities far lower

<sup>26</sup> C. Dyer, 'Dispersed Settlements in Medieval England. A Case Study of Pendock, Worcestershire', *Medieval Archaeology* 34 (1990), pp. 97–121, at p. 102.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.



than those in the areas of Hertfordshire or Essex just described, there was little woodland. Hanbury, in the west of Worcestershire and likewise studied by Dyer, is in many ways similar. In the Roman period 'cultivation extended over virtually the whole area' of the parish but by 1066 at least half was under woodland.<sup>29</sup> Subsequent assarting in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries created a dispersed pattern of isolated minor manors and peasant farms, and complex and irregular field systems, although here fewer of the assarts were held as free tenements.<sup>30</sup> Typically for 'woodland' districts in all regions, by 1300 the majority of the land in the parish was under cultivation.<sup>31</sup>

The development of these western 'woodland' landscapes differed in a number of ways from the areas in eastern England just discussed. Nevertheless, for the most part their evolution evidently followed many of the same rules, such as the tendency for early manors to be located within their own fields while smaller peasant farms were placed, almost obsessively, on common edges or on the sides of roads, which probably formed remnants of the common wastes. The latter is a recurrent feature of districts of dispersed settlement: in the words of Roberts and Wrathmell, 'The rationale of such structural characteristics is the convenience of placing farmsteads on the boundary between contrasting agrarian resources – typically, on the edge of the arable to allow easy access not only to the arable but also to the surrounding pastures', a consideration evidently more pressing for smaller and later agricultural establishments than for earlier and larger ones.<sup>32</sup> Areas of ovoid intakes, leaving small greens at their interstices, are also a recurrent feature, noted for example in the Weald of Kent and Surrey.<sup>33</sup>

### *The nucleation myth*

The above arguments suggest that the dispersed settlements characteristic of 'woodland' areas had a variety of origins, but that in many areas a significant proportion originated well before the Conquest. More importantly, there is no evidence that areas characterised by scattered settlement and irregular field systems were necessarily more sparsely settled in later or even middle Saxon times than those which in the Middle Ages came to be characterised by champion landscapes. Both kinds of countryside could be found within areas of low, medium and high population density. This in turn raises the question of why the Midland areas of England experienced such a dramatic reorganisation of their landscape in the course of the Saxon period, involving the abandonment of a dispersed settlement pattern and the creation of nucleated villages, often laid out in planned form. In fact, although the concept of settlement nucleation has hardened over the decades into orthodoxy, there are

<sup>29</sup> Dyer, *Hanbury*, pp. 15–17.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29–41.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>32</sup> Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and Place*, p. 116.

<sup>33</sup> J. English, 'A Possible Early Wealden Settlement Type', *Medieval Settlement Research Group Annual Report* 12 (1997), pp. 5–6.

grounds for doubting whether it represents the most useful way of thinking about the origins of villages.

Even a cursory examination of the published evidence reveals that the numbers of pre-village early/middle Saxon sites which have been found in Midland townships, supposedly abandoned when villages were created, has been exaggerated. Much secondary literature conveys the impression that there were dozens of such places. A classic example is David Stocker's map of Yardley Hastings in Northamptonshire, which shows numerous settlements which existed 'prior to the laying out of the open fields', but which are mainly sites of prehistoric or Roman date.<sup>34</sup> In reality, it is unusual to find more than one or two early Saxon settlements lying away from modern villages. In Northamptonshire, where the nucleation model was first developed and where more archaeological fieldwork has perhaps been carried out than in any other county in England – largely through the endeavours of David Hall – the majority of townships (51 per cent) have actually produced no such sites at all, while in a further 28 per cent of cases only one example has been located. The nucleation model could thus only really be applied to around a fifth of Northamptonshire townships. Even in these, the numbers of abandoned outlying Saxon sites are usually small. Half of these places contain only two known examples, just over a quarter contain three, and less than a quarter – a mere 4 per cent of the overall total – more than three.<sup>35</sup> It is of course true that not all of the villages in Northamptonshire have been researched with equal intensity. But it is nevertheless clear that the idea that all or even most Midland townships contain large numbers of abandoned early Saxon settlement sites is difficult to sustain. It is also noteworthy that the few places which do appear at first sight to fit the accepted model are almost without exception found in the major river valleys, on the lower and more fertile soils of the county. Yet even here there is little reason to believe that all the early Saxon sites were occupied at the same time, and then abandoned as the result of some particular nucleation 'event'. As Hamerow, Taylor and others have emphasised early Saxon settlements were often mobile and short-lived, shifting location every generation or so, and where Northamptonshire examples have been excavated, as for example at Courteenhall, occupation often seems to have been short-lived.<sup>36</sup>

Of equal importance is the fact that there is no real evidence that villages in champion districts generally overlie villages of middle Saxon date. In their ground-breaking study of the Wicklewood Forest area Jones and Page excavated test pits and trial trenches within modern settlement envelopes

<sup>34</sup> D. Stocker, *England's Landscape: The East Midlands* (London, 2006), p. 60.

<sup>35</sup> Williamson, Liddiard and Partida, *Champion*, pp. 54–9.

<sup>36</sup> Hamerow, 'Settlement Mobility'; Taylor, *Village and Farmstead*, p. 120; Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and Place*, p. 179; A. E. Brown and G. Foard, 'The Anglo-Saxon Period', in M. E. Tingle (ed.), *The Archaeology of Northamptonshire* (Northampton, 2004), pp. 78–101: p. 82; M. Shaw, 'The Discovery of Saxon Sites below Fieldwalking Scatters: Settlement Evidence at Brixworth and Upton, Northamptonshire', *Northamptonshire Archaeology* 25 (1993/4), pp. 77–92.

in a number of villages in north Buckinghamshire and southern Northamptonshire and concluded that the early/middle Saxon sites hidden beneath them comprised no more than 'one or two households': that is, they were no larger than the outlying, abandoned sites.<sup>37</sup> The large-scale excavations at the sprawling village of Raunds in the same county carried out in the 1980s and 1990s revealed not a middle Saxon 'village' but a loose cluster of early/middle Saxon sites, not all occupied for any length of time.<sup>38</sup> In a very different geographical context on the Yorkshire Wolds, the village of Wharram Percy overlies five certain settlements of early/middle Saxon date, not all of which were probably occupied at the same time, which are scattered over a distance of more than half a kilometre along a plateau edge.<sup>39</sup> This loose collection of farms eventually developed into a village, but it was not a village itself.

Nucleation is not, therefore, a particularly useful way of understanding settlement change in the middle and later Saxon periods. Indeed, with some notable exceptions, few true villages seem to have existed in middle Saxon England.<sup>40</sup> Although only partially excavated, the seventh-century 'village' at Chalton in Hampshire cannot, for topographic reasons, have extended over an area of more than c. 2.5 hectares, and the middle Saxon proto-nucleation at Yarnton in Oxfordshire less than 3 hectares.<sup>41</sup> Such places comprised small numbers of halls, with associated subsidiary structures, housing in total between a dozen and four dozen individuals, including children and slaves. Most were presumably the homes of small groups of *ceorls*, probably members of the same extended family, each accompanied by his immediate family and dependants.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, medieval villages, in the Midlands as elsewhere, commonly extend over five, ten or even fifteen times the area of such sites, and housed a proportionately larger population.

What mainly happened in the course of the seventh and eighth centuries was thus a process of settlement *stabilisation*. Settlements stopped drifting around the landscape and began to grow *in situ*. Villages did not normally come into existence in middle or later Saxon times, fully formed, at the dictates of either lords or communities. They developed over time from these much smaller settlements, as we might expect given the patterns of demographic development outlined in Chapter 1, and their forms need to be understood accordingly. In many cases, expansion was from a single nucleus: but sometimes it occurred from two or more, which eventually fused to form what Taylor has termed a polyfocal plan, 'the result of the expansion or agglomeration of . . . farmsteads or hamlets to form a single

<sup>37</sup> Jones and Page, *Medieval Villages*, pp. 85–92.

<sup>38</sup> M. Audouy and A. Chapman, *Raunds: The Origins and Growth of a Medieval Village AD 450–1500* (Oxford, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> Beresford and Hurst, *Wharram Percy*, pp. 69–84.

<sup>40</sup> The large settlement at West Heslerton excavated by Dominic Powlesland continued to be occupied into the ninth century: see Powlesland, 'Early Anglo-Saxon Settlements: Structures, Form and Layout'.

<sup>41</sup> Hey, *Yarnton*; P. V. Addyman and D. Leigh, 'The Anglo-Saxon Village at Chalton, Hampshire: Second Interim Report', *Medieval Archaeology* 17 (1973), pp. 1–25.

<sup>42</sup> Harke, 'Early Anglo-Saxon Social Structure', p. 145.

settlement'.<sup>43</sup> What is striking is that in many cases these initial, pre-village middle Saxon sites developed directly into medieval manors, as at Raunds or Wharram Percy, supporting the suggestion made in Chapter 5 that manors often evolved through social differentiation amongst the peasantry, rather than through the fragmentation of large multiple estates which were the property of a permanent elite:<sup>44</sup> for if manors had been imposed on these places from outside, why did they occupy precisely the same sites as the farms formerly occupied, one presumes, by free *ceorls*? In contrast, the late Saxon and post-Conquest additions to these initial nuclei, forming the rest of the villages, mainly comprised farms of lesser status.

### *Revisiting village plans*

Many landscape historians assume that a significant number of English villages were laid out to some pre-determined plan, either when they first came into existence, or at a later stage – perhaps when their open fields were reorganised along more regular lines. In West Lindsey, for example, the Royal Commission's meticulous examination of village forms concluded that 'a large proportion of all the sites examined . . . have their street systems, house sites and associated crofts or closes arranged in such a way as to indicate that the overall plan was the result of conscious and deliberate actions'.<sup>45</sup> Taylor in 1989 concluded, more generally, that 'a very high proportion' of English villages acquired their form 'in the tenth–twelfth century and even later . . . as the result of conscious planning'.<sup>46</sup> More recently, Gerrard's and Aston's detailed study of the landscape of Shapwick in Somerset confidently asserted the village's planned, probably tenth-century origins, and similar 'planned' villages have been identified across much of the former champion regions of that county.<sup>47</sup> But there is a danger here of assumption hardening into fact, for the equation of regularity with planning (in the sense that the observed morphologies came into existence as the result of a single individual or corporate decision) ignores a range of other possibilities, as well as carrying with it the implication that predetermined alterations to the landscape must of necessity take regular, ordered forms, and that irregularity must conversely indicate gradual and piecemeal development. One alternative interpretation would be that regular patterns might arise over time through the working of custom, as successive generations added house plots of a size or shape deemed appropriate to the status of the individuals in question: another, that they arose as settlements gradually expanded over pre-existing and regular patterns of land division, whose layout influenced the new boundaries.

<sup>43</sup> Everson, Taylor and Dunn, *Change and Continuity*, p. 25.

<sup>44</sup> Audouy and Chapman, *Raunds*, pp. 39–45; Beresford and Hurst, *Wharram Percy*, pp. 69–78.

<sup>45</sup> Everson, Taylor and Dunn, *Change and Continuity*, p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> C. Taylor, 'Spaldwick, Cambridgeshire', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* 78 (1989), pp. 71–5.

<sup>47</sup> Gerrard and Aston, *The Shapwick Project*; Rippon, *Beyond the Medieval Village*, pp. 61–105.





■ Buildings

■ Churches

■ Ancient enclosures



0 300 600  
metres

**Figure 28.** 'Regular' village plans in Northamptonshire, based on nineteenth-century maps. Villages made up largely or entirely of parallel, 'strippy' tofts are usually considered to have been laid out to some pre-determined plan. In reality, most appear to derive their distinctive form from the fact that they have expanded over arable land, already divided into plough strips.

- a. Grafton Underwood;
- b. Woodnewton;
- c. Nassington.

Each open-field strip on the map is equivalent to four on the ground.



Villages featuring apparently regular forms and elements, and in particular blocks of long, narrow, parallel tofts, have been noted in a number of counties, including Cambridgeshire, Buckinghamshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Wiltshire and Northamptonshire.<sup>48</sup> But in all cases, such arrangements have been examined in isolation from their surrounding fields. When the two are considered together it is usually quite clear that the 'planned' elements in villages share the same orientation as, and have in most cases clearly been taken out of, the adjacent arable furlongs, as for example at Grafton Underwood in Northamptonshire (Figure 28a). Here, as in many examples, there is a contrast between the main, regular area of the village, and a smaller block of more irregular properties which presumably marks the location of the nucleus, or nuclei, from which the settlement developed. Typically, this is associated with the site of the parish church. The expansion of settlements over arable land in this manner is sporadically referred to in documentary sources: two open-field strips in the fields of North Kelsey in Lincolnshire were thus granted to the monks of North Ormsby priory in the thirteenth century 'that they may make tofts of them or sow them'.<sup>49</sup> More common is archaeological evidence for such a pattern of development. Taylor noted a number of places in Northamptonshire where ridge and furrow still survives within the tofts to the rear of house sites, lying neatly parallel to the toft boundaries. He emphasised that in such cases 'occupation must have been relatively short-lived, otherwise all traces of the earlier fields would have been destroyed'.<sup>50</sup> More usually, occupation was long-lived and such direct evidence for earlier cultivation were thus entirely destroyed.

One particularly clear indication that these regular villages, or sections of villages, mainly developed through the piecemeal expansion of settlement across some kind of subdivided arable land is the fact that the toft boundaries, rather than being dead straight, are – like open-field strips – usually gently curving or sinuous. Another is the often narrow, attenuated form of the tofts. The post-medieval houses which now occupy them are, in consequence, sometimes obliged to stand gable-end to the road, a pattern particularly noticeable in Northamptonshire villages like Woodnewton (Figure 28b). It is difficult to understand why the farms in 'planned' settlements should have been provided with tofts less commodious and convenient than those in 'unplanned' ones. A further clear indication that such villages, or sections of villages, are unlikely to result from conscious planning is that many comprise a number of regular blocks laid out on different alignments, clearly replicating the jumbled orientation of contiguous furlongs, as for example at Blyton in Lincolnshire.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Everson, Taylor and Dunn, *Change and Continuity*, pp. 16–20.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>50</sup> C. Taylor, 'Aspects of Village Mobility in Medieval and Later Times', in S. Limbrey and J. G. Evans (eds.), *The Effects of Man on the Landscape: The Lowland Zone* (London, 1978), pp. 126–34, at p. 132.

<sup>51</sup> Everson, Taylor and Dunn, *Change and Continuity*, p. 24.

What is also striking is the frequency with which the plots have a width of around 15 metres, or multiples thereof. Most Northamptonshire examples are like this, and similarly in Dorset the width of the 'planned' tofts 'is remarkably consistent in that they are all 15m wide or multiples of 15m'.<sup>52</sup> This is particularly interesting given that, as Hall has noted, throughout medieval England the average width of open-field strips was around 8 yards (c. 7.3 metres).<sup>53</sup> Plots 8 yards wide would, however, be too small to accommodate a house and attendant yards. Examples twice this width, taken in at intervals from the arable fields, could do so, albeit with something of a squeeze.

It is noteworthy that these kinds of regular village plan are particularly characteristic of areas dominated by relatively light, freely draining soil, uninterrupted by pockets of damper ground. In such circumstances, the early nuclei from which villages developed were presumably surrounded on all sides by areas already under cultivation, so that additional farms had, perforce, to be laid out on intakes from the fields. Lewis, in a masterly discussion of the plan forms of Wiltshire villages, noted how the overwhelming majority of villages featuring regular rows were to be found in the south of the county, where settlement was 'densely crowded into the river valleys' cutting through the chalk downland, where the land was all equally easy to cultivate, rather than on the claylands in the north of the county, with their more problematic and variable soils. Many of these settlements 'extended for considerable distances along the valleys, and were made up of regular "planned" sections interspersed with more informal arrangements which often appear to represent small nuclei around churches or manor houses' – presumably representing, as at Grafton, the original Saxon sites from which the villages had developed.<sup>54</sup> In Dorset, similarly, the best evidence for 'planned' villages – mainly from deserted rather than surviving sites – comes from 'the valleys of the chalk dip-slope . . . in the valleys of the Rivers Tarrant, Allen, Piddle, the North and South Winterbournes and the Gussage Brook'.<sup>55</sup> Even in Lincolnshire, where correlations with geology and soils appear less close, most villages dominated by regular elements appear to be concentrated on coversands, limestones and alluvium, rather than on the more poorly draining Blisworth, Kellaways or Lower Lias clays.<sup>56</sup>

Such apparently regulated plans are striking, and it is not surprising that landscape historians and archaeologists have tended to focus their attention on them. But in reality the overwhelming majority of champion villages display much more irregular forms (Figures 29 and 30). In a very large number of cases these seem to have developed through the spread of farms into, and usually around the margins of, an area of common pasture

<sup>52</sup> C. Taylor, 'The Regular Village Plan: Dorset Revisited and Revised', in M. Aston and C. Lewis (eds.), *The Medieval Landscape of Wessex* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 213–18, at p. 217.

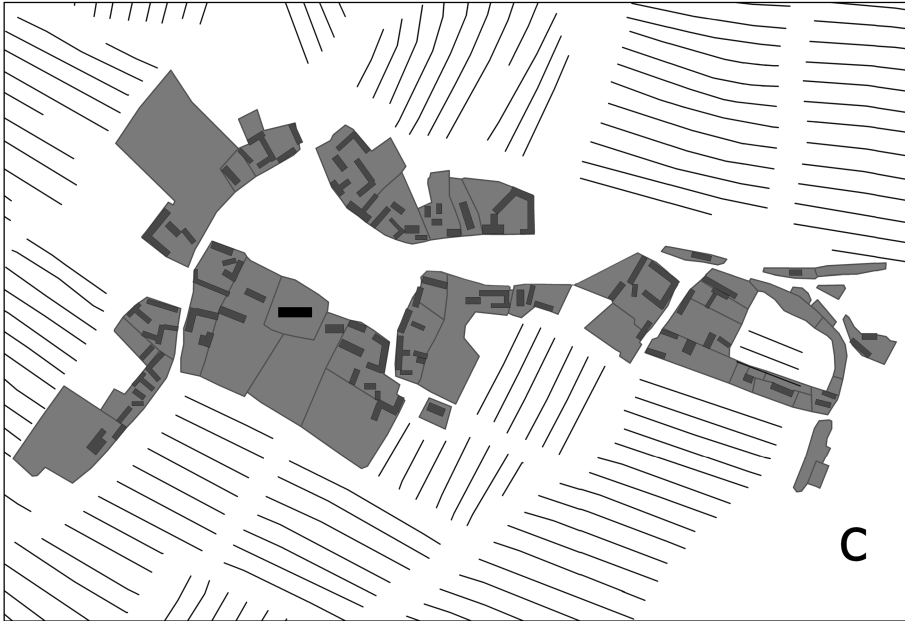
<sup>53</sup> Hall, *Open Fields of Northamptonshire*, p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> C. Lewis, 'Patterns and Processes in the Medieval Settlement of Wiltshire', in M. Aston and C. Lewis (eds.), *Medieval Landscape of Wessex*, pp. 171–94, at pp. 175–6.

<sup>55</sup> Taylor, 'Regular Village Plan', p. 215.

<sup>56</sup> Everson, Taylor and Dunn, *Change and Continuity*, pp. 10–20.





**Figure 29.** Wappenham, Northamptonshire. The plan of the village, as shown on nineteenth-century maps (a), is the result of the infilling – by two large ‘ovoids’ of houses – of a central green (b). Double building lines indicate where other areas of common land have been encroached upon in the remote past (c).

*a*



*b*







**Figure 30.** The plan of Yardley Hastings in Northamptonshire, as shown on nineteenth-century maps, features a number of small greens, connected by winding roads (a). Regression of the village plan (b and c) shows how these have been left over from the progressive infilling of a large central area of common land.

lying adjacent to the original middle-Saxon settlement (or settlements), thus creating in many cases a large central green, which was usually later filled up, to varying extents, with houses and crofts. The evidence for this pattern of development comes once again primarily from an analysis of village plans.<sup>57</sup> Many Midland villages have plans which feature small pocket-handkerchief greens linked by winding roads. These are very reminiscent of the kinds of small greens, often forming the foci for small clusters of farms, which as already noted are a feature of many 'woodland' areas, and like them make little practical sense except as residual fragments of a once more continuous block of common grazing, broken up through the insertion of ovoids of enclosed ground (Figures 29 and 30).

The houses and cottages occupying these intakes were often (although not always) subsidiary elements within the village. At least by post-medieval times, the principal farms lay on the margins of the settlement, continuing to stand on the former common edge.<sup>58</sup> Manor sites, again in a pattern

<sup>57</sup> Oosthuizen, *Landscapes Decoded*, pp. 51–9.

<sup>58</sup> Williamson, Liddiard and Partida, *Champion*, pp. 81–4.



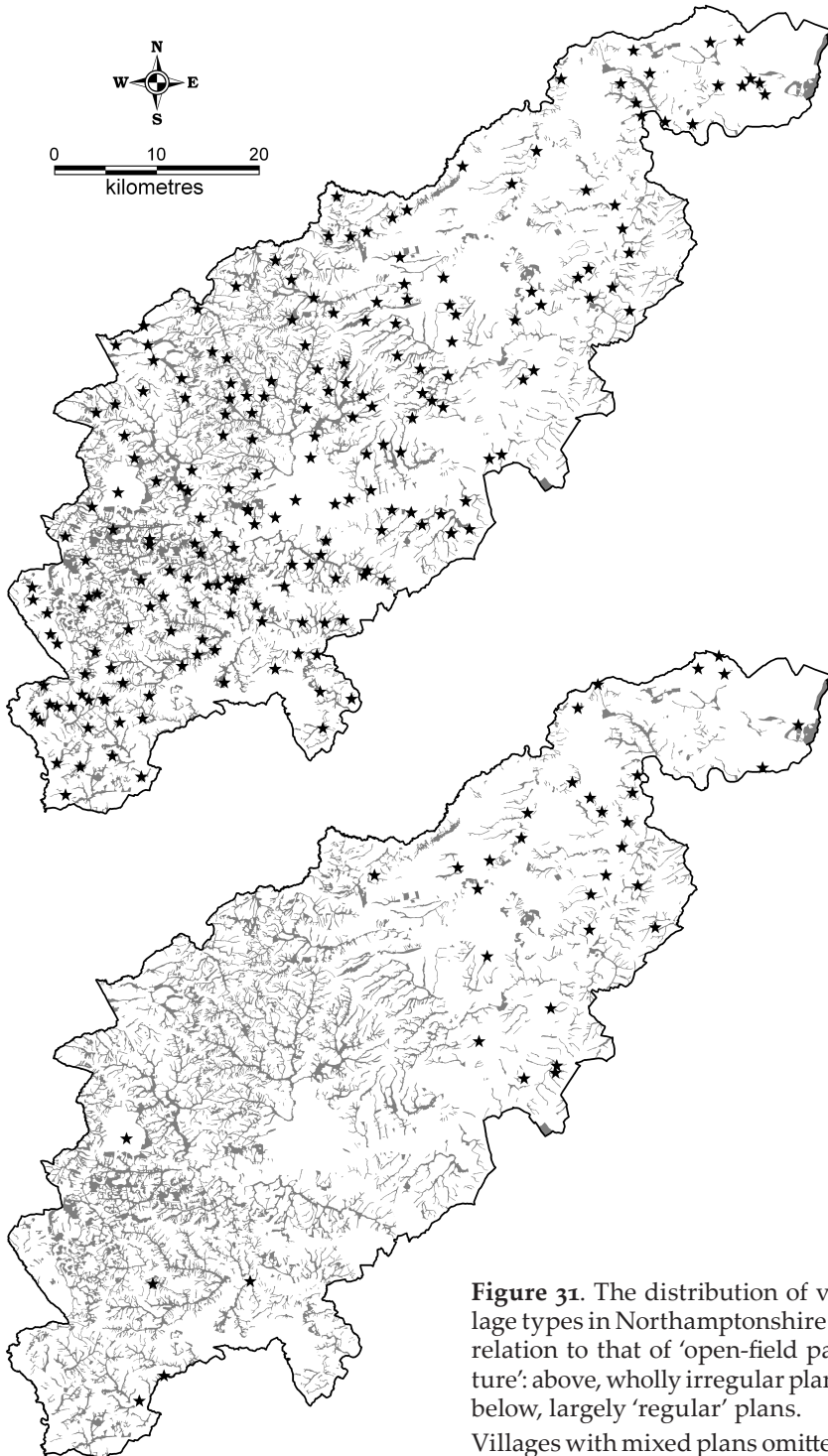
reminiscent of 'woodland' areas, often seem to stand back from the relict common. It is noteworthy, but perhaps unsurprising, that in Northamptonshire the districts in which the open fields featured numerous and extensive ribbons and bands of unploughed ground – especially on the heavy clays and mudstones of the Lias in the west of the county – were also those in which villages almost invariably display irregular forms and evidence for infilled greens, in marked contrast to the situation in the drier east, where furlongs were often almost continuous and uninterrupted and where a significant number of villages thus exhibit regular arrangements of 'strippy' tofts (Figure 31).

There were many variations on this basic pattern of village development. On the chalklands of south Cambridgeshire, as Chris Taylor has shown, villages like Thriplow or Fowlmere began as loose clusters of farms around areas of hummocky ground, patches of poorly draining land formed through periglacial action at springlines.<sup>59</sup> The larger and deeper of these waterlogged basins, as at Pampisford, were more thinly surrounded by farms, never became infilled with houses and are thus often associated with a semi-dispersed settlement pattern. The smaller depressions, as at Thriplow, were eventually colonised almost completely, leaving only fragmentary greens. Filled greens occur in other chalkland areas at springlines or watercourses. In Berkshire, for example, places like East Ilsley clearly originated as areas of low-lying, damp common ground, ringed by farms, later largely filled in with houses. In this case, the church stands on higher ground on the edge of the village and back a little from the former green, presumably marking the site of the initial farm or farms from which the village developed. In other cases the church stands well back from the former common edge, as at Milton Malsor, Warkworth or Whiston in Northamptonshire, suggesting a pattern of development similar to that seen in many 'woodland' areas, especially in parts of East Anglia, where farms often drifted to a large common, leaving churches entirely isolated 500 metres or more away. More often they stand at one end of the common or former common, as at Barrington in Cambridgeshire or Moreton Pinkney in Northamptonshire – again mirroring the situation in many 'woodland' areas. Occasionally the churchyard forms part of the infill of the common, as at Abthorpe, Adstone or Denton in Northamptonshire, although in most such cases the church is a chapelry or former chapelry of an adjacent parish, indicating its relatively late appearance. We should also note, as Sue Oosthuizen has very helpfully reminded us, that in parts of the south-east Midlands, especially on the boulder clays of north-west Cambridgeshire, many villages retained substantial fragments of these early greens, similar to the commons of classic 'woodland' districts like south Norfolk, into the nineteenth century, and occasionally to this day.<sup>60</sup>

Once again, it is important not to convey an impression of neat and watertight categories – of regular and irregular villages. The two forms

<sup>59</sup> Taylor, 'Nucleated Settlement: A View from the Frontier'.

<sup>60</sup> Oosthuizen, 'Medieval Greens and Moats in the Central Province'.



**Figure 31.** The distribution of village types in Northamptonshire in relation to that of 'open-field pasture': above, wholly irregular plans; below, largely 'regular' plans. Villages with mixed plans omitted.

of expansion from one or more middle Saxon nuclei into or around areas of pasture, often leading to the formation of large greens which were later infilled, or across arable, creating the illusion of a planned settlement, were not mutually exclusive. Many villages display elements of both patterns of development, such as Middle Rasen in Lincolnshire, where a central core of filled greens is flanked by regular rows which clearly result from expansion over arable.<sup>61</sup> In addition, blocks of regular tenements can often be found along the margins of former greens. Farms, spreading along the edges of commons, must have occupied land which had already been ploughed and divided. At Yardley Hastings in Northamptonshire, for example, many of the plots flanking the former green display the distinctive narrow, attenuated parallel form, and lie conformably with the adjacent open-field strips: Barrington in Cambridgeshire, with its row of regular tofts along the northern edge of the large green, is similar.<sup>62</sup> Many villages, like Byfield in Northamptonshire, display a complex mixture of plan forms, in this case at least two initial foci; areas of two or more infilled commons; and a peripheral block of regular tenements. On the other side of the country, in Somerset, villages like Kingsbury Episcopi similarly display complex mixtures of filled greens and expansion over former arable.<sup>63</sup> And, as Christopher Taylor has reminded us, village forms as these appear on the earliest surviving maps are also the consequence of many centuries of change in the course of the Middle Ages and later centuries, involving both expansion and contraction. Indeed, in Northamptonshire at least some of the expansion across furlongs appears to be of post-medieval rather than earlier date.<sup>64</sup>

It should be noted that these various forms of development are not only found in villages located in the champion areas of central England. They can also be discerned in the 'woodland' areas lying to either side, wherever village nucleations came into existence. Weston in north Hertfordshire had, and still has, a highly dispersed settlement pattern featuring isolated farms and green-edge hamlets, but also a principal settlement, the village of Weston, lying around a kilometre to the west of the parish church (which was itself accompanied by only a small cluster of dwellings). This features a small village green, bounded to the south-west by a small triangular island of houses enclosed by roads, which is clearly an encroachment on it. But a much larger triangle, again surrounded by roads and lying to the north-east of the green, has also apparently been cut out from it, and perhaps at quite a late stage in the settlement's development. A map of 1633 shows that this was already enclosed ground, although not as yet so densely built over as today, but a survey of 1548 describes houses here as lying *in* Oldfield Green.<sup>65</sup> Many of the tofts, especially those lying

<sup>61</sup> Everson, Taylor and Dunn, *Change and Continuity*, p. 21.

<sup>62</sup> S. Oosthuizen, 'Ancient Greens in Midland Landscapes: Barrington, Cambridgeshire', *Medieval Archaeology* 46 (2002), pp. 110–15.

<sup>63</sup> A. Ellison, *Medieval Villages in South-East Somerset* (Bristol, 1983), p. 51.

<sup>64</sup> Williamson, Liddiard and Partida, *Champion*, pp. 84–7.

<sup>65</sup> Hertfordshire Archives and Local History, Hertford: HALS Accn. 4283, Map of the Parish

of the north-western side of the former green, have clearly been taken out of former arable strips. Where nucleated settlements existed in 'woodland' districts they thus appear to have come into existence in a similar manner to those in champion districts: not through the sudden nucleation of a once more scattered pattern of settlement, at the behest of local lord or great magnate, but instead gradually, through slow expansion from one or more much smaller cores, neighbouring *ceorl* households. Conversely, the fact that, in their early stages of development, many champion villages comprised loose scatters of farms around the margins of areas of common grazing similarly reduces the apparently separate and distinctive character of settlement forms in the 'two countrysides'.

### *The antiquity of open fields*

Many historians have associated, not unreasonably, the supposed creation of nucleated villages in middle or later Saxon times with the laying out of open fields, and some have suggested or implied that the distinctive features which the latter exhibited by the time we see their form clearly in the later Middle Ages – especially the even and often regular distribution of holdings throughout the fields of a township – were present from the start.<sup>66</sup> An alternative view, as expressed by Joan Thirsk or by Harold Fox, is that 'Midland' open fields may have undergone a number of distinct stages of development, so that the kinds of regular, ordered arrangements of holdings identified by Hall in many Northamptonshire townships were the consequence of remodelling earlier, more irregular patterns of intermixed properties.<sup>67</sup>

An absence of documentary evidence makes it very unclear when open fields, in the more limited sense of areas comprising intermixed parcels of arable, first came into existence in England. Some historians have suggested that they were present in some places as early as the late seventh century. This is because one of the laws drawn up by King Ine of Wessex describes how some *ceorls* held 'common meadow or other land divided into shares', and shared between them the responsibility for maintaining the stock-proof fence which surrounded the parcel of land in question.<sup>68</sup> The wording of the document makes it clear that such arrangements were not ubiquitous. What is unclear is whether the parcels so described necessarily took the form of *strips*, rather than plots of other shapes, more suitable for cultivation with a simple ard. We do know, however, that by the middle of the tenth century very extensive areas of intermixed arable strips existed across parts of the south Midlands, especially in chalk countryside (see above, pp. 147–8).

Historians have suggested two main ways in which intermixed arable could have developed: through partible inheritance, and through the

of Weston, 1633; HALS 49464, Survey of the Manor of Weston 1548.

<sup>66</sup> Hall, *Open Fields of Northamptonshire*, pp. 137–8.

<sup>67</sup> Thirsk, 'The Common Fields'; Fox, 'Approaches to the Adoption of the Midland System'.

<sup>68</sup> Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 368.

sharing of land newly broken in from pasture and waste between those who had formerly used it in common.<sup>69</sup> As described in Chapter 1 there is good evidence that partible inheritance was normally practised at all social levels in the pre-Conquest period. But this would not in itself necessarily have led to the development of intermixed holdings, for land could have been held jointly by heirs, as seems to have occurred at times in early-medieval Kent, or the inheritance could simply have been divided in the form of two, three or more discrete blocks. The division of a holding in the form of intermingled parcels indicates both highly individualised attitudes to property and a desire to see an equality of quality, as well as of quantity, in the division of land – a desire that each recipient obtained land of equal value, in terms of fertility or accessibility. We should also note, as Kerridge has done, that intermixed parcels of arable land may well have arisen through other forms of allotment: to colonists, under-tenants, or even freed slaves.<sup>70</sup> On the demesne lands of tribal kings the holdings of bond tenants may have been allocated in this way from an early date, as was the 'reckoned land' (*tir cyfrif*) in early-medieval Wales, which was distributed by the king's officers 'to every one in the *tref* as good as to each other'.<sup>71</sup> Again, the choice of intermixed rather than discrete shares suggests a desire to achieve an equality of value, presumably because similar obligations were expected from each of the individuals holding the lands in question. Similar arrangements may have been instituted on the *warland* of large estates once these had been alienated to noble families or (in particular) the Church. In addition, as I suggested earlier, many of the manors which we meet in the pages of Domesday may well have developed as certain individuals within the peasant class prospered at the expense of others, rather than through the progressive subdivision from above of multiple estates: and in such places the first open fields may have emerged as such individuals, acquiring more land than they or their families could possibly cultivate, allocated parts of it to tenants in return for rents or services.

Patterns of intermixed holdings, evolving in a variety of ways and associated with a range of tenurial forms, may have been widespread in England by the start of the tenth century, and quite possibly earlier. But the kinds of extensive, regularly ordered field systems we find in the Midlands by the thirteenth century appear to be a subsequent development, mainly perhaps dating to the eleventh century and in some cases as late as the twelfth. There are a number of reasons for suggesting such a late chronology. Firstly, even at the time of the Conquest many Midland areas, including most of Leicestershire, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire, had only three ploughteams or less per square mile.<sup>72</sup> Many districts had around two. It is difficult to assess

<sup>69</sup> Thirsk, 'Common Fields'; Bishop, 'Assarting and the Growth of Open Fields'.

<sup>70</sup> Kerridge, *Common Fields of England*, pp. 48–9.

<sup>71</sup> Jones, 'Early Customary Tenures', p. 208; A. R. Williams, *Llyfr Iorwerth: A Critical Text of the Venedotian Code of Welsh Mediaeval Law* (Cardiff, 1960), p. 54.

<sup>72</sup> H. C. Darby and I. B. Terrett, *The Domesday Geography of Midland England*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge,



precisely what this might have meant in terms of the area of land under cultivation but Campbell, writing with experience of the fourteenth-century *Inquisitions Post Mortem*, has calculated that one medieval plough can be expected to work around 65 sown acres (25 hectares) on average soils.<sup>73</sup> If, as seems likely, most Midland townships were farmed at the time of Domesday on a two-course rotation then each plough could cultivate around 130 acres (50 hectares), allowing for fallow, suggesting that little more than 40 per cent of the land area was under cultivation in 1086, albeit with local variations ranging from around 35 per cent to around 60 per cent. We have few reliable figures for the extent of cultivation in the Midlands at the height of the medieval population peak but in Northamptonshire, as already noted, the careful mapping of ridge and furrow, and of other archaeological remains of open-field cultivation, combined with a measure of documentary research, suggests that by c. 1300 around 66 per cent of the land area was in tilth, varying in particular townships from as little as 50 per cent to as much as 90 per cent. The expansion of cultivation thus still had some way to go in most champion districts at the time of the Conquest and the open fields existing at this point must have covered a significantly smaller area than when we first encounter them in maps and documents.

The number of separate farms within settlements also probably continued to rise after the Conquest and into the twelfth century. Again, thanks to David Hall's work in Northamptonshire we can obtain some broad idea of the extent of the increase, which was probably shared by other champion areas in the central and southern Midlands, although not necessarily by districts lying in the north-east of the country, in parts of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, where Domesday shows that population levels were already high. There are fifty-eight townships in Northamptonshire for which we can compare, with a reasonable degree of confidence, the number of yardlands (the standard peasant farm) in the thirteenth or fourteenth century with the number of farms (the holdings of villein tenants, sokemen or bordars) which are recorded in Domesday Book. On average, there was an increase of around 190 per cent. At Muscott, for example, a regular cycle of 19 yardlands is set out in the field book of 1433 but there were apparently only three farms here at the time of Domesday; at Mears Ashby there was by the fifteenth century a regular cycle comprising 40 yardlands but at the time of Domesday there were only half this number of farms; at Byfield there were 72 yardlands but only eighteen Domesday holdings.<sup>74</sup> It might be argued that each of the Domesday holdings in these and other villas was equivalent to two, three or more regularly dispersed yardlands, and that these subsequently became divided in a regular fashion as the number of farms proliferated, but it is extremely doubtful (to say the least) whether this could possibly have happened, through divided inheritance or whatever, in such a manner that the

1971), pp. 396–9.

<sup>73</sup> B. M. S. Campbell, *English Seigniorial Agriculture* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 121.

<sup>74</sup> Hall, *Open Fields of Northamptonshire*, pp. 177–81, 219–20, 226–8.



observed degree of regularity could have been maintained. A more plausible explanation is that the cycles post-date Domesday, and were created after the additional farms had come into existence.

In Northamptonshire, as we have seen, David Hall has detected a relationship between the yardland structure of many townships – the number of virgates which they contained – and their hidation assessment, as laid down in Domesday Book. He argues that this reflects the importance of taxation as an underlying structuring force in the tenurial organisation of Midland townships and their fields, although it is of course possible that both hidation and tenurial organisation were related in another way, with the hidation reflecting the arable capacity of the land, which was itself related to the number of arable holdings.<sup>75</sup> To Hall, this relationship indicates that the open fields must have been fully developed almost everywhere by the time of the Conquest, and that fields and tenurial structures were thus created some time in the middle or later Saxon period. Yet it is clear that hidation assessments were not stable, but changed over time, so that those recorded in Domesday may not have been very old, in Northamptonshire as elsewhere. A charter for Badby, Dodford and Everdon in that county, dating to 944, which unquestionably includes the later vill of Snorscombe and Newnham, assesses the estate at 30 hides, but charters of c. 1020 state that Newnham contained 5 hides and Badby 4,<sup>76</sup> while Domesday gives the combined assessment of all five places (Newnham is included in Badby) as only 8. Similarly, the township of Braunston was assessed at 8 hides in a charter of 956, but at less than 4 in Domesday.<sup>77</sup> And what was true at a local level was true of the county as a whole. Domesday lists a total of 1,179 hides in Northamptonshire; but the document called the *County Hidage*, compiled in the middle of the eleventh century, gives an assessment of 3,200 hides, while the geld roll, which dates to the early post-Conquest period, suggests 2,664.<sup>78</sup> It is possible, however, that there was rather less change in the period after Domesday, the survey perhaps serving to fossilise assessments, for the total hidation of the vill in the county given in a survey of Northamptonshire dating to 1124, 1,192, is remarkably close to the 1,179 recorded in Domesday.<sup>79</sup> If Hall is indeed correct in seeing a relationship between hidation and the virgate structure of many Northamptonshire villis this must suggest a relatively late date for the recasting of open fields in their final, fully developed form. But at the same time, it implies a date before c. 1200, for in the thirteenth century hides ceased to be employed for fiscal purposes.

That few Midland open fields can have been recast in regular form after c. 1200 is also suggested by the simple fact that we have few, if any, references

<sup>75</sup> As suggested by Faith (personal communication).

<sup>76</sup> Brown, Gelling and Orr, 'Badby Revisited'.

<sup>77</sup> P. Sawyer (ed.), *The Charters of Burton Abbey*, Anglo-Saxon Charters, II (Oxford, 1979), pp. 22–3.

<sup>78</sup> J. H. Round, 'Introduction to Domesday Book', in W. R. D. Atkins and R. M. Serjeantson (eds.), *The Victoria County History of Northamptonshire* VOL (London, 1902), pp. 257–300, at pp. 268–9.

<sup>79</sup> J. H. Round, 'The Northamptonshire Survey', in Atkins and Serjeantson (eds.), *Victoria County History of Northamptonshire*, VOLpp. 357–92.

to such a development in the documentary record, even though by the thirteenth century documents of all kinds become far more common than they had been in earlier periods. Some thirteenth- and fourteenth-century examples of remodelling have been proposed but, as Fox has pointed out, the documents in question describe not the reorganisation of properties within the fields, but merely readjustments of the boundaries between the latter – the transition from a two- to a three-field system – as at South Stoke in Oxfordshire in 1240, or at Mursley and Dunton in Buckinghamshire, where in 1345 it was agreed that ‘in order to take greater profit from the lands . . . the tenants may in future sow two parts of all their lands each year’.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the only documentary evidence which appears to show a reorganisation of the properties *within* fields comes, as Fox has noted, from the mid-twelfth century. An early-thirteenth-century extent of Dunstable Priory thus describes the two-field system at Segenhoe in Bedfordshire, but also gives details of its creation in the 1160s as the result of meetings held at the courts of the two manorial lords, overseen by six old men of the township, where ‘knights, free men and others . . . surrendered their lands under the supervision of the old men and by the measure of the perch, to be divided as if they were newly won land, assigning to each a reasonable share’. A document from the West Park cartulary similarly describes how in the 1150s the five lords of Dry Drayton in Cambridgeshire agreed on a ‘new division’ of the land of the vill, ‘both field land and meadow’, a move which was ‘exceedingly necessary’ as the land lay ‘dispersed in minute parts’ in such a manner that it could not be effectively cultivated.<sup>81</sup>

The suggestion that regular open fields were a relatively late, often post-Conquest, development is, of course, not new. In many ways it marks a return to the views of an earlier generation of historians. Joan Thirsk argued that ‘we can point to the twelfth and first half of the thirteenth centuries as possibly the crucial ones in the development of the first common-field systems’; Taylor in 1975 doubted whether ‘the system had actually evolved sufficiently to reach this [classic] state much before the twelfth century’; while Hatcher and Miller argued in 1978 that ‘there can be no doubt that the time of definition in many places did lie in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries’.<sup>82</sup> We must be careful, however, not to push the argument too far the other way, for the evidence outlined above makes it unlikely that many open fields were recast, in regular form, after c. 1200. There seems little doubt that in most Midland townships the open fields reached their fully developed form, in terms of both extent and regularity, in the period between the tenth and the late twelfth century, rather than earlier or later.

We do not know how early the various forms of open fields which we encounter in the districts outside the Midland belt first came into existence.

<sup>80</sup> Fox, ‘Approaches to the Adoption of the Midland System’, p. 81.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>82</sup> Thirsk, ‘The Common Fields’, p. 23; C. Taylor, *Fields in the English Landscape* (London, 1975), p. 72; J. Hatcher and E. Miller, *Medieval England: Rural Society and Economic Change 1086–1348* (London, 1978), p. 96.

Charter evidence shows that by the late tenth century very small parcels of arable land, almost certainly lying within open fields, existed in many parts of Norfolk and Suffolk; they also hint at how these may have developed. The early-eleventh-century will of Thurketel of Palgrave in Suffolk, for example, bequeathed 20 acres to four men; it also refers to the 'middle furlong' at Roydon Hill.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, a number of charters from 'woodland' areas include terms which are usually indicative of open-field cultivation – like *æcer*, *gara* or *furh* – in their bounds, as for example at Great Gaddesden in the Hertfordshire Chilterns in c. 943.<sup>84</sup> It is also true that many tenth- and eleventh-century charters from such districts do not mention open fields, but these are principally from places in which subdivided arable always remained a minor element of the landscape. Whenever areas of subdivided arable developed in non-Midland districts there are good grounds for believing that here, too, the kinds of systems into which they were organised, as these appear in late-medieval and post-medieval documents, were of no very great antiquity. Firstly, as in the Midlands, there is abundant evidence that the area under cultivation was still expanding at the time of the Conquest. In Norfolk, for example, a county in which the majority of arable land most likely lay in open fields by 1300, probably only around 40 per cent of the total land area was under the plough at the time of Domesday, and Campbell has suggested that in some east Norfolk townships, where open fields were ubiquitous, the cultivated area may have doubled in the two centuries after Domesday – in spite of the fact, it should be noted, that this was already the most densely settled area of England.<sup>85</sup> Secondly, in this particular part of the county, as in many other districts, the arable strips making up a particular holding were clustered close to the farm from which they were cultivated. Yet as we have seen, many of the scattered settlements in this region only developed in the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, so the same, presumably, must be true of the associated holdings in the fields.

### *Conclusion*

There is no evidence that champion landscapes represent the core areas of early-medieval settlement or that 'woodland' areas were invariably late-settled, marginal lands. Versions of both of these broad kinds of landscape (and what we might describe as intermediate forms of countryside) could be found in areas of high, low and medium population density, although the bewildering variety of regional forms which each displayed was not simply a consequence of demography: these also exhibited a close, intimate relationship with subtle variations in the natural environment. It is often assumed that the development of 'woodland' and champion regions diverged

<sup>83</sup> D. Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills* (Cambridge, 1930), no. 24.

<sup>84</sup> Crick, *Charters of St Albans*, pp. 161–2.

<sup>85</sup> Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and Place*, p. 187; Campbell, 'Commonfield in Eastern Norfolk', p. 20.

as early as the seventh or eighth centuries, with the latter experiencing the nucleation of a formerly scattered settlement pattern and, perhaps, the beginnings of communal agriculture. But nucleation and the lordly planning of villages are both largely mythical and, insofar as the 'two countrysides' were ever distinct and separate entities, they perhaps only really became so gradually, as population growth accelerated in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. What the seventh and eighth centuries witnessed was not a process of settlement nucleation and the emergence of fully developed villages, but rather a process of settlement stabilisation which created a pattern of small sites – the homesteads, for the most part, of peasant *ceorls* – which already displayed much variation in density and distribution. In some areas, as in the major Midland valleys, loose clusters of two or more farmsteads sometimes developed; elsewhere, as for example in parts of Hertfordshire and Essex, a more scattered pattern could be found; and where the soils were mainly heavy and poorly draining, as in western Northamptonshire, relatively few, widely dispersed, sites existed.

In the course of the later Saxon period, and into the post-Conquest centuries, settlement expanded, villages gradually came into existence, and a significant number of *ceorl* households appear to have evolved, in the manner suggested in Chapter 5, into manorial sites. In some cases the farms added to the initial settlement nuclei presumably represented the homes of dependants holding by service tenancies; elsewhere they may have been the homes of related kin, as sokelands were progressively divided between coheirs. Many late Saxon villages presumably included both types of holding. In what were to become 'woodland' districts, however, the new farms were not simply added to existing settlement cores but, at least from the tenth century and increasingly through the eleventh and twelfth, they spread out across the surrounding landscape. The result was a settlement pattern which was to varying degrees dispersed, and the precise character of which was conditioned by the scale of late Saxon expansion, the density of population and the particular nature of local soils and topography. The examples briefly discussed earlier in this chapter demonstrate both the extent of resultant variety, but also the shared grammar of such landscapes. What is also important, however, is that much of this grammar, and especially the importance for farms to be located on the margins of networks of common grazing, was also shared by settlement in what were becoming champion areas, at least in the earlier stages of their development. For here, as villages gradually developed through the fusion of one or more early nuclei, the additional farms often expanded into and around areas of common pasture, sometimes creating large central greens which were subsequently, for the most part, infilled.

## Landscape and Settlement

It has become fashionable amongst some researchers to emphasise the role of human agency in the formation of landscapes.<sup>1</sup> Forms of field and settlement were not determined by the environment, natural or social, but were instead the consequence of choices made by social actors. Accepting for a moment the usefulness of such an approach, we might begin this stage of our enquiry by asking what kinds of factors may have influenced the decisions made by early-medieval people, whether peasants or members of a social elite, concerning where they should live; and in particular over whether manors, farms and cottages should remain in close proximity as cultivation expanded, or whether they should disperse across the landscape. I emphasise the plural – *factors*. In different circumstances, two, three or more aspects of the environment may have encouraged peasant farmers (or their social superiors) to make choices which, over time, produced one form of settlement pattern rather than another.

### *The hydrology hypothesis*

The most important environmental influence on the form and pattern of medieval settlement, but also by far the most neglected, was almost certainly water supply. Modern landscape historians either ignore this issue, or imply that it was irrelevant in the location or distribution of early settlement, presumably because water was freely available everywhere, or because for some reason ease of supply was of no concern to those deciding the sites for farms.<sup>2</sup> Such a view was not shared by an earlier generation of historical geographers, who repeatedly drew attention to the clustering of settlements besides springlines and the like. Even W. G. Hoskins devoted sections of *The Making of the English Landscape* to such matters as the importance of natural meres as foci for Anglo-Saxon settlement in areas of chalk downland.<sup>3</sup> But through the middle and later decades of the twentieth century scholars gradually downgraded the importance of this issue and it is difficult to believe

<sup>1</sup> Jones and Page, *Medieval Villages*, pp. 239–42; M. Johnson, *Ideas of Landscape* (London, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Taylor, *Village and Farmstead*, p. 12. There are a handful of exceptions, most notably C. Hayfield and P. Wagner, 'From Dolines to Dewponds: A Study of Water Supplies on the Yorkshire Wolds', *Landscape History* 17 (1995), pp. 49–64.

<sup>3</sup> Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape*, pp. 51–2.

that this tendency was unconnected with the gradual fading from memory of a time – which continued into the 1940s and 1950s in many rural districts of England – when few people enjoyed the convenience of mains water.<sup>4</sup>

My own interest in this unfashionable and superficially mundane issue stems from the fact that my own home, rather unusually in the twenty-first century, is located far from a water main, and depends entirely on a well, a mere 8 metres in depth, cut into the boulder clay; and more specifically by a recent period of drought, which prompted worries not only over how the human inhabitants of my diminutive farm would manage in the absence of water, but perhaps more importantly what would become of the livestock which are kept here. In the Middle Ages, when a rather larger (and more serious) agricultural enterprise operated from this place, its inhabitants would have been even more worried by the potential failure of the well, for it lies far from any reliable watercourse. Aside from the needs of the farmer and his family, around 135 litres per day are required for every milking cow kept on a farm.<sup>5</sup> In the event the well did not run dry, and to my knowledge never has. Like the other farms and cottages scattered across the 'ancient countryside' of the south Norfolk claylands, this place has always benefited from a reliable supply of groundwater. A dispersed pattern of settlement, that is, can only develop in circumstances in which water is freely available, or available at a large number of different places. Conversely, in areas where water supplies are more restricted, the potential for a scattered pattern is less; where it is limited to a single location, farms must perforce congregate in nucleations; and even where it is widely available in some form, settlement might be expected to cluster around one particularly prolific and dependable source.

It is true that water for livestock could be provided by surface ponds, either dug into an impermeable formation or specially constructed. In extreme circumstances human drinking water could also be so supplied, as on the higher Wolds in Yorkshire.<sup>6</sup> But the evidence suggests that people were fully aware of the dangers, in health terms, of such sources and in most circumstances they were avoided. In Stamp's words, 'whilst tolerably satisfactory for watering animals, even in the past a pond was rarely to be regarded as suitable as a supply for human consumption'. Equally important is the fact that, as Stamp also noted, 'A pond . . . was particularly liable to dry up and fail when water was most needed'.<sup>7</sup> Ponds fed by rainfall and surface run-off would only suffice if there was no alternative, and most water was thus obtained from springs or wells, and therefore derived from aquifers: that is, geological formations which are permeable, and in which – to varying extents – water accumulates, and can be stored, such as chalk, limestone, sands and gravels. Although by the thirteenth century some high-status residences were provided with deep wells, most peasant households relied on water accessed at no great depth, and the fact that the water table tends

<sup>4</sup> Stamp, *Land of Britain*, pp. 186–7, 241–3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>6</sup> Hayfield and Wagner, 'Dolines to Dewponds'.

<sup>7</sup> Stamp, *Land of Britain*, p. 241.



in many circumstances to fluctuate over the year would need to be taken into account by those sinking wells.<sup>8</sup> The key point to emphasise here is that clay formations do not in themselves constitute aquifers, for they are to varying degrees impermeable. They may hold surface water in the form of ponds, and in some cases water can pass slowly through them into other formations, but their main function in terms of ground water supply is to act as aquitards, holding water in permeable strata above, and often forcing it to move sideways so that it emerges on the side or base of a slope as a spring or seepage line.

It is extremely difficult to learn much about medieval water supply, for two reasons. Firstly, as already noted, archaeologists and others studying medieval settlement have shown virtually no interest in the subject. Astill's and Grant's *The Countryside of Medieval England*, for example, devotes a mere five lines to the subject, while Roberts and Wrathmell mention the matter on only a handful of occasions in their monumental *Region and Place*.<sup>9</sup> More importantly, modern texts on hydrology are concerned with the mass supply of dense urban and suburban populations, using piped water derived from large reservoirs collecting surface water or from major aquifers, such as the chalk of south-eastern England. Such works understandably exhibit no interest in minor local aquifers, capable of meeting the immediate needs of single farms or small rural settlements. Fortunately, interest in hydrology as a science began in England while such local sources were still being exploited on a significant scale, and we can thus learn much from books such as Horace Woodward's *The Geology of Water-Supply* of 1910.<sup>10</sup>

These make it clear that small-scale supplies – sometimes described as 'limited supplies for small houses' or as 'adequate for the cottage-wells' – can be obtained across large areas of England, more or less anywhere, by sinking a well of modest depth. One important source is represented by the sands and gravels found on the floors of many river valleys, from which 'water is almost everywhere to be found, at or about the level of the river'. More significant is the boulder clay which covers extensive tracts of ground in East Anglia, Essex and Hertfordshire, where the water comes not from the clay itself but from the numerous lenses and layers of sand and gravel which are almost everywhere intercalated within it. These layers collect water percolating slowly through the clay but in addition, usually tilted, they eventually intersect with the surface at the edges of the clay plateau, or where it is incised by shallow valleys, allowing water to enter but – trapped between the clay layers above and below – not to leave.<sup>11</sup> The principal Pliocene beds of southern England, including the crag, generally serve as moderate aquifers, comprising as they do sands and gravels, often overlying clay; so too do most of the Eocene formations, including the Bagshot, Woolwich and Reading and Thanet beds.

<sup>8</sup> D. Hartley, *Water in England* (London, 1964).

<sup>9</sup> G. Astill and A. Grant (eds.), *The Countryside of Medieval England* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 57 and 145; Roberts and Wrathmell, *Region and Place*, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> H. B. Woodward, *The Geology of Water Supply* (London, 1910).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 148–52.

Only the impermeable London clay is of less use in this respect, although in many places it includes a basement bed of sand, flint-pebbles and occasionally bands of hard calcareous sandstone, which, in Woodward's words, 'locally . . . yields small amounts of water'.<sup>12</sup> Similar in this respect is the Wealden clay, where local supplies can be obtained – again not from the clay itself, but from the bands of shelly limestone, or layers of sand and gravel, intercalated within it – and the surrounding Hastings beds, from which small supplies can be obtained in many places, although not everywhere.<sup>13</sup> In some cases, medieval (and later) settlements in the south-east of England depended for their water on very thin and often discontinuous permeable surface deposits overlying impermeable clay, as across the dipslope of the Chiltern Hills, the tops of the Berkshire Downs, or in places along the North Downs. Here the impermeable clay-with-flints *sensu stricto* which overlies the chalk is itself overlain by the so-called plateau drift, varying in clay content but always permeable relative to the clays below.<sup>14</sup> In a similar manner, the Claygate beds and pebble gravels form thin aquifers, water at their base being held by the underlying London clay. In short, across most of south-east England and East Anglia water was widely available from local aquifers.

Across much of the west of England, likewise, reasonable supplies of water were usually freely available. From Devon and Somerset to Cheshire the geology is dominated by a complex of Triassic rocks, variously grouped and defined, the upper levels of which generally include intercalated layers of sandstones and mudstones (the Penarth and Mercian mudstone formations) which provide widespread if limited supplies of water from surface wells. Moreover, over large areas, in Cheshire and Shropshire especially, the solid rocks are again overlain with layers of drift comparable in thickness to those found in East Anglia and again providing an easily accessed local aquifer.<sup>15</sup> Lastly, in many parts of the Highland Zone, where boulder clays or similar aquifers were not present, fast-flowing streams passing over hard, erosion-resistant rocks provided good supplies of drinking water across wide areas.

In many parts of England it was therefore possible to access water for domestic consumption with relative ease across wide areas of the landscape, and any potential source was of similar quality and reliability as another. But there were some areas of the country where this was less true. It was difficult or impossible to obtain water on the surface of thick masses of permeable rock, most notably the chalk of southern and south-eastern England, for the water table generally lies far below the surface, out of range of wells. In such circumstances water could only be accessed on major escarpments, like that of the Chiltern Hills or the North Downs, or in deep consequent valleys cutting into dipslopes. In these circumstances the fluctuating water table intersects with the surface, so that springs occur, and in places marked springlines form where there are significant changes in the consistency of

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 154–9, 156.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 177–8.

<sup>14</sup> J. Catt (ed.), *Hertfordshire Geology and Landscape* (Welwyn, 2010), p. 257.

<sup>15</sup> Woodward, *Water Supply*, pp. 148–52.

the chalk, or at its base, water emerging naturally via fissures at a limited number of points. Such saturated levels can also be accessed by wells.

Water was also often hard to obtain across large areas of the Midlands, where the Jurassic and early Cretaceous strata are, as described in Chapter 2, all tilted, creating scarp-and-vale country in which successive rock formations are exposed as escarpments of varying magnitude. Many comprise heavy, impermeable clays which often lack significant layers of permeable material – the lenses of sand and gravel which provide such abundant supplies of water on the East Anglian boulder clays. These older formations simply shed water directly into surface watercourses, rather than absorbing it deep into the ground: groundwater supplies are thus absent or limited. The West Walton formation, for example, comprises calcareous mudstone, silty mudstone and siltstone, and with only local occurrences, at considerable depth, of fine-grained sandstones and argillaceous limestone (cementstone) or siltstone nodules, which provide a limited and generally inaccessible aquifer. In some areas coralline marls and limestones also exist within these clays (including the Elsworth rock member and the Upware limestone member) but their occurrence is localised.<sup>16</sup> Similar is the Oxford clay, which attains a depth of nearly 30 metres across much of the south Midlands, and which is ‘for the most part wholly impervious’.<sup>17</sup> The thinner Kellaways beds at the base of this formation do contain some sandy, permeable layers but even where these could be reached by medieval wells ‘the water is rarely of good quality. Indeed, from the Vale of Blackmore in Dorset to Melksham, Oxford and Bedford, saline waters have frequently been encountered beneath the Oxford clay’.<sup>18</sup> Third, and perhaps most important, are the various impermeable mudstones and clays within the Lias group – the Charmouth mudstone of the Lower Lias, the various silts and clays of the Middle Lias, and the Whitby mudstones of the Upper Lias, ‘a great impervious series of dark shales or clays’.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, the Midlands are not entirely occupied by impermeable clays and mudstones like these. Between the Oxford clay and the Lias lie the various formations of the Great and Inferior Oolite, widely exposed in Lincolnshire, Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire, although mostly obscured by glacial till in Northamptonshire. These formations mainly feature limestones and sands, including the Cornbrash, the Lincolnshire limestone, the Upper and Lower Estuarine series, the Great Oolite limestone and the Northampton Sand. They thus act as aquifers, and feature springlines at their base, especially where the Northampton Sand overlies the Upper Lias clays. They also include some clay layers, which can act as minor aquitards and likewise produce springlines

<sup>16</sup> B. M. Cox and R. W. Gallois, ‘Description of the Standard Stratigraphical Sequences of the Upper Kimmeridge Clay, Amptill Clay and West Walton Beds’, in R. W. Gallois, *Geological Investigations for the Wash Water Storage Scheme*, Report of the Institute of Geological Sciences 78/19 (1979), pp. 68–72.

<sup>17</sup> Woodward, *Water Supply*, p. 186.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

where the tilted contact lines emerge at the surface, while minor springlines can even occur at the junction of two effectively permeable formations, where the lower is slightly less permeable than the upper. The major formations of impermeable clay just described themselves sometimes include thin, inclined beds of intercalated sands or limestones which, exposed at an escarpment, might similarly present a minor springline, like that which occurs at the foot of the Marlstone Rock in western Northamptonshire, south-eastern Warwickshire and parts of north Oxfordshire. None of this, however, detracts from the fact that water supplies were concentrated in particular locations, at geological contact lines, and within these were further focused where fissures and vents in the permeable strata led to the creation of reliable springs. The Midland landscape might thus be characterised as a series of narrow bands, where fresh water was readily available as springs at a limited number of places or could be tapped with more difficulty at depth, via relatively shallow wells. These bands were separated by rather wider zones of effectively waterless countryside.<sup>20</sup>

The importance of water supply as an influence on settlement is evident from even a cursory perusal of geological maps. Northamptonshire, Leicestershire, north Oxfordshire, eastern Warwickshire and north Buckinghamshire are, quintessentially, landscapes of springline villages, in spite of the derision with which terms like this are now generally greeted by landscape historians and archaeologists. Many settlements are thus associated with the junction of the Upper Lias clays and the permeable Northampton Sand. The cores of such villages are mainly placed on the sands, rather than the underlying Lias, for this formation provided suitably well-drained sites as well as pockets of easily cultivated soils in countryside otherwise dominated by damp mudstones and clays. It has been estimated that in Northamptonshire alone well over a third of villages are to be found on this springline, in spite of the fact that the Northampton Sand cover only around 8 per cent of county's land area, and large numbers of settlements are similarly sited in the adjoining counties of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.<sup>21</sup> Another major springline occurs at the base of the Great Oolite limestone, whether this rests of the Upper Estuarine series, the Lower Estuarine, or even in some cases on the Northampton Sand.

Again, settlements associated with this springline are particularly prominent in Northamptonshire, accounting for perhaps a sixth of the county's villages, with a similar proportion occurring at the junction of the Marlstone Rock and the clays and silts of the Middle Lias, or at the base of the Lincolnshire limestone in the far north of the county. Not only the location but to some extent the morphology of the Midland villages was strongly influenced by water supply. In the case of villages associated with the Northampton Sand, for example, it is noticeable that many are strung out in a roughly linear fashion approximately along the junction with the Upper Lias, rather than at

<sup>20</sup> B. A. Hains and A. Horton, *British Regional Geology: Central England* (London, 1969), p. 109.

<sup>21</sup> S. H. Beaver, *Northamptonshire and the Soke of Peterborough: The Report of the Land Utilisation Survey of Britain*, parts 58–9 (London, 1943), p. 365.

right angles to it, presumably to allow houses to access the shallow aquifer on the thinner margins of the Northampton Sand with relative ease. In the north-east Midlands, as the curving lines of the scarps and vales swing north, similar hydrological imperatives are clear in the location of villages: in West Lindsey in Lincolnshire, for example, 'Most of the larger settlements, at least, produce a repetitive pattern of river-edge, scarp-foot, springline, clay-edge or wold-valley positions, their sites clearly conditioned by access to water or the availability of dry land'.<sup>22</sup>

Those who know the landscapes of the Midlands will be aware, however, that what I have written so far slightly over-simplifies the hydrogeology of the region. The Greensand, for example, lying below the Gault clay, acts as an aquifer which could be accessed, at least from settlements situated on lower ground, in valleys. Local aquifers were also provided by the sands and gravels found on the valley floors of rivers like the Nene, Ouse and Welland. Such subtleties of geology complicate the pattern outlined, but they do not significantly change it. More important is the objection that the discussion so far relates only to the solid geology and, as explained in Chapter 2, across much of the higher ground of the region, especially in Leicestershire, Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire, significant deposits of boulder clay can be found, blanketing the Jurassic formations. This, given what has been said about the boulder clays in East Anglia as an important aquifer, apparently lessens the force of the argument that the Midland landscape was one in which settlement, for hydrological reasons, might have been encouraged to develop in clustered forms. But in fact the boulder clays of the two regions exhibit a number of significant differences. In the Midlands the layers of till are often significantly thinner, frequently less than 10 metres thick and seldom more than 30, whereas in East Anglia they are commonly more than 30 metres in thickness and can often reach more than 50 metres.<sup>23</sup>

More importantly, while in both areas the till was initially laid down during the Anglian glaciation, that in the Midlands was subsequently modified by the advance of the Wolstonian ice, which did not reach south or east of Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire. This produced a significant sorting of the drift, with much of the sand and gravel being re-deposited on lower ground, so that the boulder clay is less stratified than in East Anglia, Hertfordshire or Essex, and thus contains fewer significant and continuous lenses of sand or gravel.<sup>24</sup> Water might be available, but it was less dependable than that which could be accessed on lower ground at the principal contact lines in the solid geology. Only along the lower southern margins of Northamptonshire, and in the adjacent areas of Huntingdonshire, north Buckinghamshire,

<sup>22</sup> Everson, Taylor and Dunn, *Change and Continuity*, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> I. Jackson (ed.), *Britain beneath Our Feet: An Atlas of Digital Information on Britain's Land Quality, Underground Hazards, Resources and Geology* (London, 2004). The thickness of the drift in Cheshire and adjacent counties – areas of dispersed settlement – is also in general greater than in the Midlands, although less than in East Anglia.

<sup>24</sup> Kevin Page, University of Plymouth (personal communication).

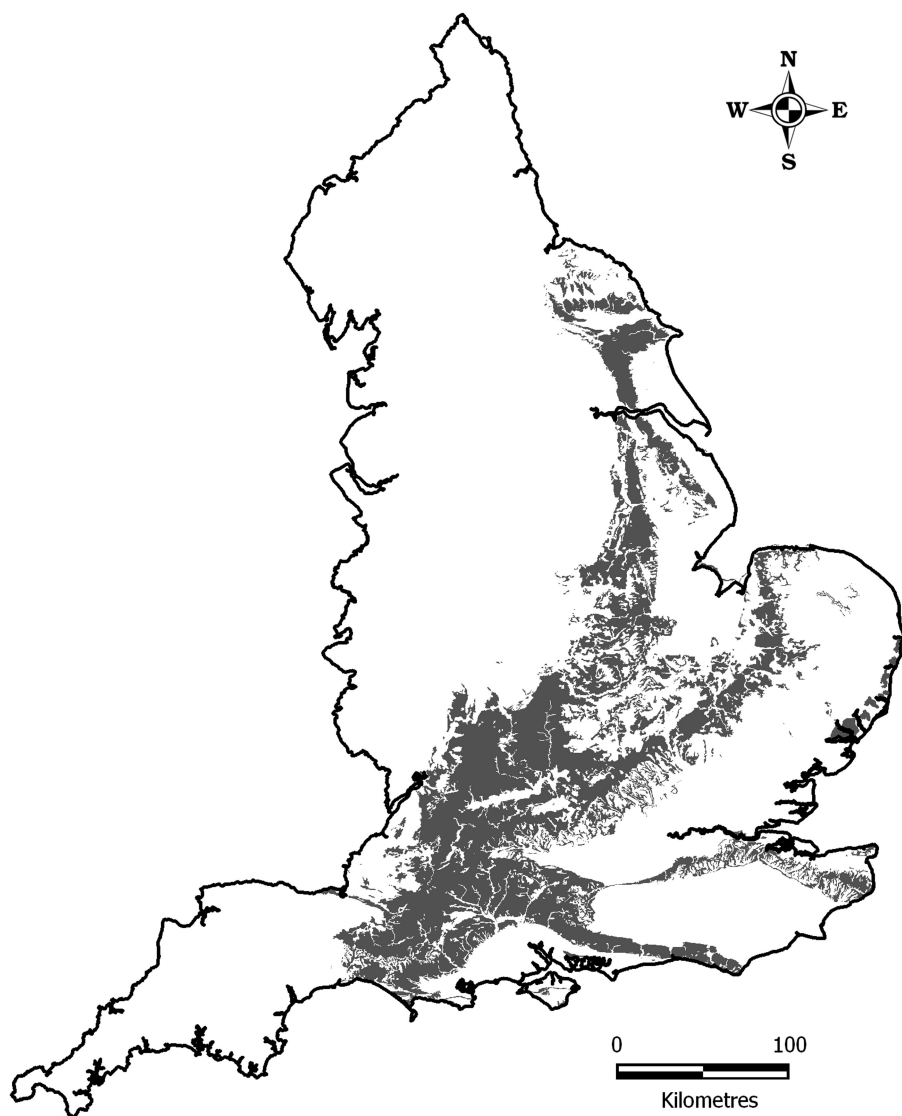


Cambridgeshire and in particular Bedfordshire, are boulder clays more akin to those of Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex or Hertfordshire encountered, although even these often constituted a less reliable source than that provided by springlines in the solid geology. Elsewhere, and especially on the higher ground of Northamptonshire and Leicestershire, the glacial drift only provides a reliable supply of water where boulder clay is overlain, as it sporadically is on the higher ground, by continuous deposits of late glacial gravel, exploited by villages like Collingtree, Milton Malsor or Old in Northamptonshire. Lastly, as I shall emphasise presently, settlement patterns and the location of individual settlements were not a function of water supply alone. While the upland till of the Midlands could provide a supply of water for farms, it also – lying at a higher altitude and further to the west than the similar deposits in East Anglia – gave rise to damp, difficult soils, which were only brought into cultivation on any scale relatively late in the Saxon period. Nevertheless, the glacial till could potentially provide a reasonably reliable aquifer in most locations, and in consequence Figure 32 shows, for England as a whole, only those till-free areas within which water supplies were limited or focused in the manner just described.

It will be immediately apparent that in the central Midlands there were strong incentives for settlement to remain clustered, at springlines or on valley floors, rather than to spread more evenly across the landscape as the area under cultivation expanded. The same was true to an even greater extent on the chalk scarps and plains of southern and south-eastern England, and in much of western East Anglia, where the permeable chalk was often overlain, in the case of Breckland to a significant depth, by equally permeable wind-blown glacial sands. The distribution of champion districts, and those in which hydrogeological factors either concentrated water at a limited number of points and bands, or in which the water available at such locations was superior in quality and quantity to that available elsewhere, is remarkably close. The recognition that water supply was a key influence on settlement helps, moreover, to explain the apparent conundrum that champion landscapes in England are characteristic of what at first sight appear to be completely different, if not diametrically opposed, environments, those presented by highly permeable formations like chalk, and those associated with heavy, impermeable clays. Both, in spite of radical structural and mineralogical differences, were characterised by an absence of easily accessed groundwater supplies of good quality.

Indeed, a contrast in field and settlement patterns between areas of restricted, and largely unrestricted, water availability can be seen at a local as much as at a national level, as in the areas of east Hertfordshire and north-west Essex discussed in the last chapter, where chalk is overlain by boulder clay but exposed in the sides of the numerous valleys cut by rivers like the Rib, Quin, Ash, Stort, Granta and Blackwater. In the valleys, open fields remained extensive on the wide and waterless slopes into post-medieval times: settlement was clustered to either side, in hamlets and villages located beside springlines or on permeable gravels on the valley floors, or else on the





**Figure 32.** Areas of England in which supplies of water are limited or concentrated: compare with the landscape regions depicted in Figure 20.

margins of the clay plateau above. On the wide clay-covered interfluvies, in contrast, settlement was highly dispersed, with numerous isolated farms and small green-edge settlements exploiting the perched water table afforded by the lenses of sand and gravel within the glacial till.

It is easy to see how the slow expansion of single farms, or small groups of farms, into sizeable villages clustered beside reliable water sources could have led to the emergence of a pattern of splintered and extensively intermixed

holdings scattered across the surrounding landscape. Whether new farms were being created through the division of holdings between members of a family or through the allocation of land to dependent tenants (see above, pp. 177–8), they could hardly have taken the form of ring-fence properties lying at a distance from the existing settlement focus, as these would have been remote from the farmstead itself and thus inconvenient to manure, cultivate and (in particular) reach at harvest time. The obvious solution would have been to allocate land in the form of scattered blocks of convenient size, something which would have provided equality in terms of both access and land quality – for in many circumstances the land lying closer to the settlement was more fertile, not least because it had received more manure over the years, from byres, yards and middens, than that lying at a distance (hence the old proverb, ‘the nearer the church, the richer the land’). Subsequent subdivision of holdings would have increased intermixture; so too would assarting, the taking in of land on the margins of the cultivated area, in the manner suggested by Bishop, as those who had formerly exploited areas of common grazing, and who had assisted in its conversion to arable, received their due shares.<sup>25</sup> The clustering of farms, engendered by hydrogeological factors, would thus naturally have led to the extensive intermixture of properties and thus the eventual emergence of forms of communal agriculture.

### *The limits of the hydrology hypothesis*

While hydrological factors were clearly significant in generating local and regional variations in medieval settlement and field systems other influences must have played their part: for like many models advanced by archaeologists and historians, and especially perhaps by landscape historians, this one makes sense enough until possible alternative patterns of development, within the same general circumstances, are considered. We might note, for example, that the development of a nucleated settlement pattern would not, in itself, necessarily have led to the emergence of extensive areas of intermixed arable. The additional holdings created as population increased might in theory have been laid out in the form of discrete strips or wedges of land extending out from the settlement, to the edges of the cultivated area, rather than as intermingled strips. Such an arrangement would likewise have served to equalise the value of shares without producing the kinds of practical agrarian problems which intermixed holdings might generate. Indeed, some post-medieval enclosures of Midland open fields took such radial forms, as at Newbottle in Northamptonshire, enclosed in 1680.<sup>26</sup> Such a pattern might be maintained, in the form of increasingly narrow yet still discrete and unitary parcels, through any subsequent subdivision of holdings, theoretically creating in time the kind of long, narrow plots encountered

<sup>25</sup> Bishop, ‘Assarting and the Growth of Open Fields’.

<sup>26</sup> Williamson, Liddiard and Partida, *Champion*, p. 210. The arrangement of boundaries is first shown on a map of 1715: British Library Additional manuscript 78143.

in certain Irish contexts (the ladder fields of Ulster and Connacht), or by large-scale reclamation in the silt fens of East Anglia in the twelfth century, where individual farms, sometimes scattered rather than closely clustered, cultivated strips around 20–30 metres wide but as much as a kilometre in length.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, it is possible that the long furlongs which Hall has discerned underlying and predating the later, more complex furlong patterns of open fields in Northamptonshire may represent something similar.<sup>28</sup> The development of clustered rather than scattered patterns of settlement, in other words, would not necessarily have led to the development of intermixed holdings.

Another problem with the model, and perhaps a more important one, is that the restricted character of water supply in champion areas was not normally so great that it dictated a single viable location for settlement. True, in most if not all of these districts farms could never have been so widely and evenly scattered as they generally were in 'woodland' regions. But nevertheless, in chalk country as much as in clay vale, medieval settlement could have been more dispersed than it actually was. There were, for example, usually a number of viable springs issuing at a particular contact line, some providing supplies of water which had been utilised in prehistoric, Roman or early Anglo-Saxon times, but which lacked attendant settlements by the Middle Ages. Hydrological factors were evidently important, but other influences must have encouraged farmsteads to remain clustered as settlement expanded, and their associated holdings to develop in intermingled form. Hydrology is a vital and neglected part of the story, but it is not the story itself.

As noted at the start of this chapter, one way of addressing this problem is to think of the perceived advantages and disadvantages which might accrue from the dispersal of farms across the landscape as population rose and the area under cultivation expanded. On the one hand there was the convenience of living in the centre of a compact block of farmland, and the resultant benefits in terms of access at critical times of the farming year, ease of supervision and the efficiency with which (for example) manure from the farmyard could be spread across the fields. On the other hand, living in isolation from neighbours may have had social disbenefits. If the farms which were gradually added to the initial middle Saxon nuclei were the homes of under-tenants, owing labour services, it would perhaps have been convenient to have them dwelling in close proximity, especially if they provided not only agricultural labour but also assistance of a more domestic character. If on the other hand the additional farms were occupied by members of the same kin group, then familial ties, a desire to dwell close to siblings or parents, might well have been important. However, it seems reasonable to assume that such essentially social factors would have operated in all districts, in 'woodland' as much as in champion, suggesting in turn that it was influences of a primarily agricultural nature which encouraged clustering, influences

<sup>27</sup> R. H. Buchanan, 'Field Systems of Ireland', in Baker and Butlin, *Studies of Field Systems in the British Isles*, pp. 580–617; 590; Silvester, *The Fenland Project*, pp. 160–1.

<sup>28</sup> Hall, *Open Fields of Northamptonshire*, pp. 131–5.

which were stronger in some areas than in others because of the particular character of farming practices engendered by the local environment.

*Farming territories and topographic patterns*

One difficulty we face when examining the relative strength of factors encouraging or discouraging proximate living is that these probably changed over time, depending in particular on developments in technology and agrarian practices. In the early Saxon period, and still to some extent in the middle and late, the principal areas of cultivated land were located on the lighter, more freely draining soils. But by the high Middle Ages a far greater area and range of soils were under the plough. The heavier and more poorly draining the soil, in general, the later it was brought into cultivation. The configuration of cultivated and uncultivated land within any area or district will thus have altered with the passing centuries, but in earlier periods especially it may well have been a factor in the extent to which settlement took a clustered or a dispersed form. In north-west Essex or eastern Hertfordshire, for example, there was a particularly marked contrast between light, freely draining soils within the principal valleys – formed in chalk, or in a mixture of chalk and drift – and the heavy, poorly draining stagnogleys associated with the boulder clays on the plateau lying above and between them. The lighter land formed relatively narrow ribbons running through the claylands. We might anticipate that in such circumstances ease of access to farmland would encourage farms to spread along these strips of lighter land, rather than becoming concentrated at a more limited number of locations, not least because water was freely available on the valley floors (from springs arising from the chalk aquifer) or on the edge of the plateau (from the perched water table in the boulder clay). Sure enough, by the time of Domesday there clearly were, as already explained, numerous separate settlements in existence, in addition to the farmstead clusters from which the later parishes derived their names (above, pp. 00: Figure 20). These formed a dispersed pattern of settlement which was subsequently augmented as from the eleventh century cultivation and settlement spread across the heavy ground of the interfluvies between the principal valleys. Conversely, in situations in which the more easily worked soils formed larger and more continuous blocks, or where for other reasons arable expanded more evenly in all directions, there might be less incentive for farms to scatter. The overall configuration of arable land may thus, in theory at least, have been a significant influence on the ways in which settlement itself developed, at least in the earlier stages of the emergence of regional landscapes.

It is also possible that raw topographic form may have exerted an influence on how settlement developed. It is noticeable, for example, that classic champion landscapes tend for the most part to be found in level, planar or gently rolling terrain. ‘Woodland’ countrysides can also be found in such locations: but where the topography is particularly incised and dissected it

is usually the latter that we find, as for example in the western Chilterns, in the Weald of Kent, in much of Devon and in the clay-with-flints countryside of Berkshire. Journeys to and from farm and field were made longer and more arduous by broken terrain, especially in winter, and this may have encouraged farms to migrate away from initial nuclei. All these essentially topographic influences – the detailed configuration of soils and terrain – are extremely difficult to map, or their importance to evaluate, at a national level. But they should perhaps be given greater consideration in local or regional studies of settlement.

### *Co-aration*

Rather easier to map and evaluate, and almost certainly a far greater influence on the development of settlement, were a number of basic agrarian practices whose relative importance was closely related to variations in the natural environment. One was the sharing of ploughteams. As early as the 1930s the Orwins argued for the importance of co-aration (plough-sharing) in the genesis of the open fields.<sup>29</sup> They noted that the sharing of ploughs amongst farmers was common practice in early-medieval England because both the plough itself and the animals that pulled it together constituted – like modern combine harvesters – expensive pieces of equipment which were only used at limited times of the year. As noted in Chapter 1, Domesday and other late Saxon documents make it clear that on heavier land at least a plough was pulled by six or even eight oxen, at a time when each villein owned on average around 2.9.<sup>30</sup> In such a situation it is easy to see how, as larger and heavier ploughs came into widespread use in the course of the Saxon period, and as cultivation expanded onto more difficult ground, farmers might have been encouraged to live in close proximity in order to facilitate sharing. But the Orwins' arguments were rejected long ago on the not unreasonable grounds that co-aration was practised in all districts of England, those characterised by nucleated and dispersed settlement patterns alike. As Homans argued, farmers living at a distance from each other evidently found no difficulty in sharing ploughs.<sup>31</sup> More importantly, the idea that co-aration was itself common practice in medieval England has been questioned by Langdon, who has argued that the larger farmers normally had their own teams, and that these were smaller than the large, eight-ox teams which were usual on manorial demesnes.<sup>32</sup> This latter argument is mainly based, however, on thirteenth-century evidence, by which time there was a greater degree of polarisation in the size of peasant holdings. Given that one of the key features of many open-field systems was the intermingling and joint farming (through labour

<sup>29</sup> Orwin and Orwin, *The Open Fields*.

<sup>30</sup> R. Lennard, 'The Economic Position of the Domesday Villani', *Economic Journal* 56 (1946), pp. 244–64, at p. 256.

<sup>31</sup> Homans, *English Villagers*, p. 81; Dodshon, *British Field Systems*, pp. 31–3.

<sup>32</sup> Langdon, *Horses, Oxen and Technological Innovation*, pp. 235–41.

services) of demesne and tenanted land, it would seem unlikely that different forms of ploughing were, at least when fields first came into existence, employed on each. And with regard to Homans's arguments, it is arguable that in certain circumstances the sharing of ploughs may have encouraged people to live close to their neighbours to a greater extent than in others.

Much of the Midlands, as I have emphasised, is characterised by Jurassic and Cretaceous clays and mudstones, which give rise to particularly difficult soils. These all suffer from seasonal waterlogging, but many of them, such as those of the Denchworth, Oxpasture or Ragdale series, are also pelostagnogleys or non-calcareous pelosols, which are silty or clayey to the upper horizons, and thus particularly susceptible to structural damage when ploughed wet.<sup>33</sup> Compaction serves to exacerbate the problems of seasonal waterlogging, and if soils are seriously impacted they can dry to a hard, brick-like mass, from which it is difficult or impossible for germinating cereals to emerge. Even certain soils types which in south-eastern England or East Anglia presented few difficulties to farmers were, in Midland areas, often problematic in this respect, because of higher levels of precipitation, such as those of the Hanslope Association.<sup>34</sup>

There was thus in many Midland districts a very short period during which the land could be safely cultivated, especially in the spring, something which remains true to this day on the worst soils. Such soils can also, it is true, be found outside the Midlands, especially in the north and west of England. These, however, were areas, as we have seen, in which high levels of precipitation ensured lower levels of soil fertility, as well as problematic harvests. They thus carried low population densities, ensuring that sizeable nucleations could seldom have developed anyway, at least before the high Middle Ages. Arable land use was restricted to small pockets of better-drained soils, settlement was scattered, and 'pastoral strategies offered a method of utilising land unsuitable for the plough'.<sup>35</sup> This was different from the situation in the Midlands, where most of the heavy, sticky clays could, with care, be cultivated. Figure 33 thus shows the distribution, not of all pelostagnogleys and non-calcareous pelosols, but only of those which are found in areas receiving less than c. 700 mm precipitation *per annum*.

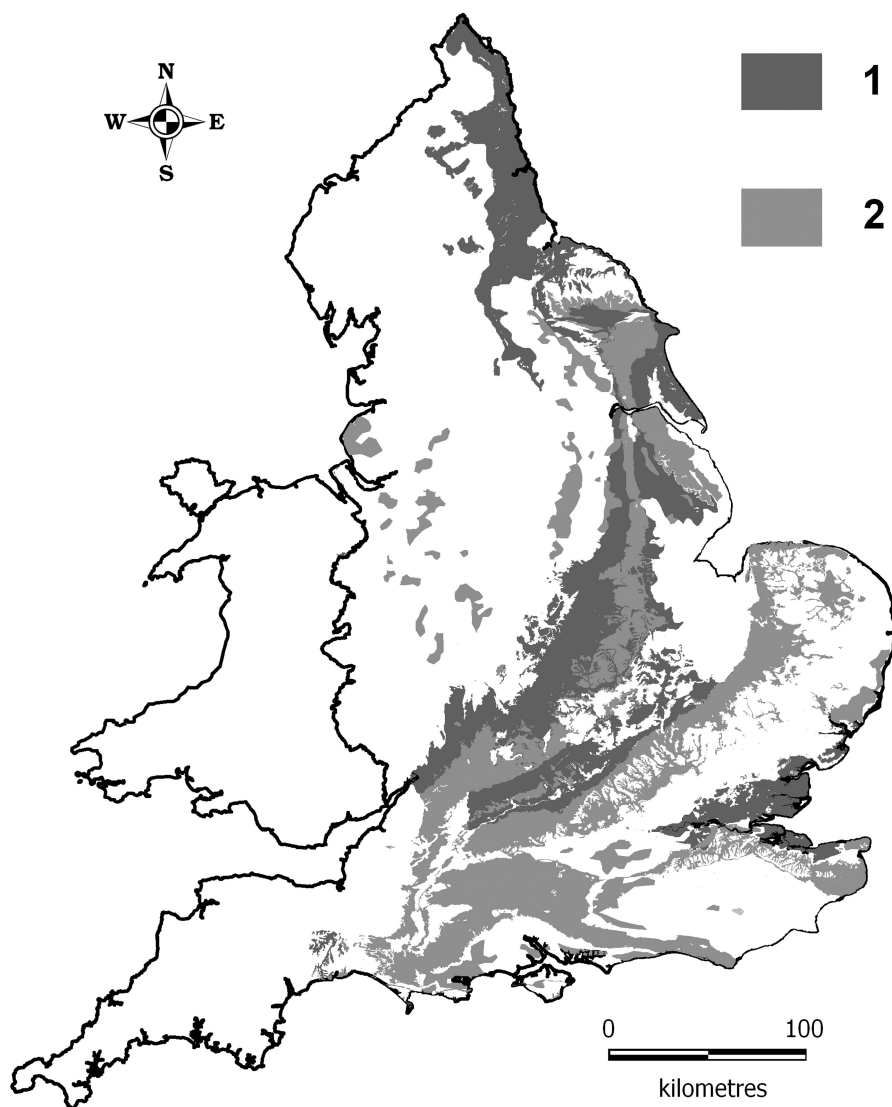
Clustered settlements may thus have facilitated the rapid mobilisation of shared ploughs and teams within a region in which, for the hydrological reasons already outlined, settlement was anyway prone to cluster. But in addition, co-aration and a particularly short window for spring cultivation may explain, at least in part, why holdings took the form of strips scattered evenly across the territory of the township. Such an arrangement ensured that the holdings of those who contributed shares to the common plough were distributed in an equitable manner across land of varying aspect and drainage potential, and lying at varying distances from the village. Because

<sup>33</sup> Hodge *et al.*, *Soils and their Use in Eastern England*, pp. 73, 155–8, 186–92, 209–12, 285–8, 295, 351–4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 209–12.

<sup>35</sup> Higham, 'Patterns of Settlement in Medieval Cheshire'.





**Figure 33.** The distribution of soil types which may have encouraged the development of clustered settlement. 1. Areas dominated by pelostagnogleys or non-calcareous pelosols and with less than 700mm average rainfall *per annum*. 2. Areas of light, freely-draining soils formed in chalk, limestone or sands in which close folding of sheep was practised in order to maintain fertility (compare with Figure 20).

the common ploughs moved steadily across the area of the fields, this intermingling of holdings allowed each farmer an even chance of getting his land ploughed in time for spring sowing. In some clayland champion districts (but less frequently in those characterised by freely draining soils) holdings were, as we have seen, often reorganised at some stage in particularly

structured and regular forms, with yardlands of similar size following a recurrent sequence across the furlongs and with the entire tenurial structure allegedly linked to the fiscal liability of the vill.<sup>36</sup> It seems probable that the demands for close cooperation, in terms of ploughing and other tasks, engendered by these problematic environments may also have encouraged an obsessive interest in equality and fairness more generally on the part of the communities in question.

The association of champion countrysides with such difficult soils has puzzled a number of researchers in the past because of the way it contradicts the normal assumption that they were the early settled, primary areas of grain production. Dyer, for example, noted the fact that in Worcestershire woodland areas often corresponded with tractable soils, like those of the Whimple 3 Association, while soils of the Evesham 2, Denchworth and Wickham Associations, 'waterlogged and difficult to work in the spring', 'provided the environment for the nucleated villages and champion husbandry of the Warwickshire Feldon and parts of the Vale of Evesham'.<sup>37</sup> Dyer concluded that modern assessments of soil quality were misleading in some way as a guide to medieval farming, but viewed in the light of the arguments just advanced the correlation becomes perfectly explicable.

I have advanced this argument elsewhere:<sup>38</sup> but it has been criticised, and not unreasonably, by Jones and Page in their invaluable study of the landscape of Whittlewood Forest.<sup>39</sup> They have pointed out that a pattern of small hamlets would have been sufficient to provide, and rapidly assemble, ploughteams. Plough-sharing on difficult soils, that is, would not necessarily have led to the formation of large villages. This argument would make good sense if medieval villages had indeed come into existence, fully formed, as a consequence of middle- or late-Saxon settlement nucleation. The realisation that there was no great nucleation event, and that villages developed through slow expansion, generation by generation, as farms were gradually added to initial Saxon nuclei, rather lessens the force of this objection. Slow expansion would have militated against the establishment of new farms in isolated locations, away from the organised routines and shared resources of the existing community. Moreover, as already emphasised, all this was happening within a region in which, for hydrological reasons, settlement anyway tended to take a clustered form.

One important indication of the challenging character of the clay soils of the champion heartlands for arable farmers is provided by their agricultural development in the course of the late-medieval and post-medieval periods. The bulk of Northamptonshire and Leicestershire, north Buckinghamshire, north Oxfordshire and the Warwickshire Felden all saw a steady decline in arable farming from the fifteenth through to the nineteenth century. The laying of land to pasture was facilitated by enclosure but was by no means dependent

<sup>36</sup> Hall, *Open Fields of Northamptonshire*, pp. 82–94.

<sup>37</sup> Dyer, *Hanbury*, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> Williamson, *Shaping Medieval Landscapes*, pp. 141–59.

<sup>39</sup> Jones and Page, *English Villages*, pp. 240–1.

upon it, for Midland farmers found all kinds of ways of expanding the area under grass within the open fields, with the institution of leys, 'green ends', and cow pastures adding to what were anyway (as we have seen, pp. 148–9) often very extensive ribbons or bands of grassland. Pre-enclosure estate maps, like that drawn up for Denford in Northamptonshire around 1730, show that large areas of the open fields, although unenclosed, had nevertheless been laid to grass.<sup>40</sup> Naseby, on particularly intractable Lias clays, had 94 per cent of its surface area enclosed by parliamentary act in 1820: yet John Mastin, the vicar, described in 1792 how only a third of the township was cultivated as arable.<sup>41</sup> Most of the piecemeal enclosures made in these clayland townships appear to have been laid to grass, and the bulk of pre-parliamentary enclosures by agreement were unquestionably associated with the expansion of pasture. Much the same was true of parliamentary enclosures, to judge from the evidence of the 1801 Crop Returns, even though by the second half of the eighteenth century population, and cereal prices, were rising rapidly. The vicar of Breedon on the Hill in Leicestershire thus reported how

Within the last thirty years almost all the country north-west of Leicester to the extremity of the county has been enclosed: by which means the land is become in a higher state of cultivation than formerly; but on account of a great proportion of it being converted into pasturage much less food is produced than when it was more generally in tillage.<sup>42</sup>

The Crop Returns, and the estimates made by contemporary writers on agriculture, make it clear that by the start of the nineteenth century pasture was the predominant form of land use in most parishes on the Midland clays. Wedge estimated in 1794 that some 232,000 acres (c. 94,000 hectares) of Warwickshire were meadow, pasture and 'feeding ground', and only 154,530 (62,500 hectares) in tillage – and of this, 57,330 acres (23,200 hectares) comprised rotational grass.<sup>43</sup> Less than 16 per cent of the total land area of Leicestershire, according to the Crop Returns, was under arable crops by 1801 and locally the figure was often lower.<sup>44</sup> In Burton Overy there were only 93 acres (38 hectares) under cultivation out of a total of nearly 1,800, while in the adjacent parish of Carlton Curlieu only 30 acres (12 hectares), out of a total of 1,378 (558 hectares), were in tilth.<sup>45</sup> In the clay vales of north Buckinghamshire similarly the pastures were extensive. Less than 20 per cent of the county north of the Chiltern escarpment lay under arable crops.<sup>46</sup> It is this steady grassing down of the arable open fields, of course, that explains the

<sup>40</sup> Boughton House archive, Northamptonshire, uncatalogued.

<sup>41</sup> C. Valls and K. Collins, *A Georgian Country Parson: The Rev. John Mastin of Naseby*, Northamptonshire Record Society 42 (2004), p. 97.

<sup>42</sup> M. E. Turner, *Volume 190: Home Office Acreage Returns HO67: List and Analysis*, vol. II (London, 1982), p. 53.

<sup>43</sup> J. Wedge, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Warwick* (London, 1794), p. 50.

<sup>44</sup> M. E. Turner, 'Arable in England and Wales: Estimates from the 1801 Crop Return', *Journal of Historical Geography* 7 (1981), pp. 291–302, at p. 294.

<sup>45</sup> W. G. Hoskins, 'The Leicestershire Crop Returns of 1801', in W. G. Hoskins (ed.), *Studies in Leicestershire Agricultural History* (Leicester, 1949), pp. 1–22.

<sup>46</sup> Turner, 'Arable in England', p. 294.

thousands of hectares of ridge and furrow in pasture fields which, until the Second World War, was such a characteristic feature of these districts.<sup>47</sup> The clayland areas of Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire saw a similar pattern of development, although less pronounced, and by the twentieth century most of the central Midlands had been laid to pasture (see Figure 5).

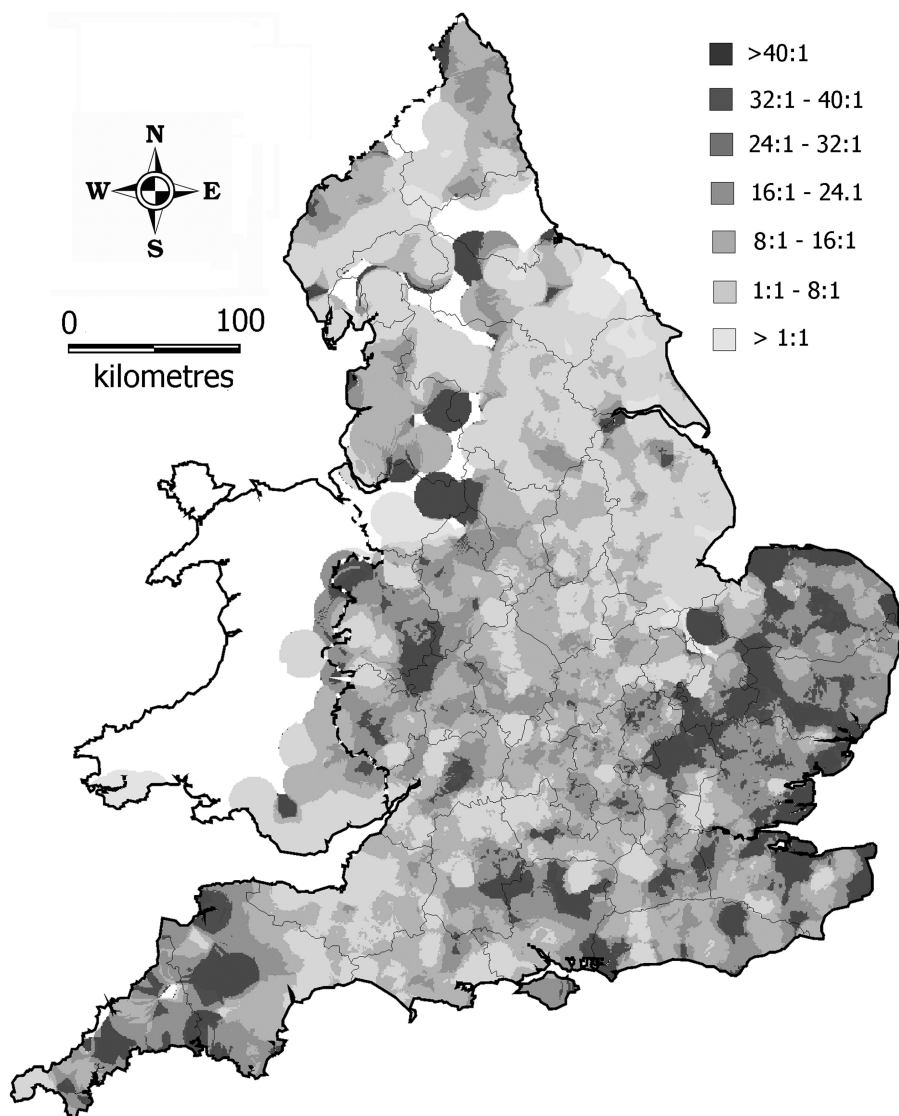
The strong implication of all this is that, far from forming the core areas of arable production in the early Middle Ages, naturally suited to the cultivation of cereals, the central core of the champion Midlands – the bulk of Roberts's and Wrathmell's Central Province – was a problematic district for farmers owing to a combination of difficult clay soils and a relatively damp climate. As an integrated national economy developed – unevenly in the early-modern period, more rapidly in the period of the classic agricultural revolution, c. 1750–1850 – cereal growers in the central Midlands simply found it impossible to compete with farmers elsewhere, especially those in the increasingly arable east of England, because of high ploughing costs. What is also worth noting, perhaps, is that the shift to pasture was not shared by all parts of the Midlands. Nineteenth-century sources indicate clearly that whereas most of the Midland clays were laid to grass in the course of the post-medieval period the low-lying boulder-clay countryside of Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire and Bedfordshire was an exception, continuing even after enclosure to specialise in cereal cultivation. This district was characterised by clay soils of the Hanslope Association, calcareous pelosols, but lying at a lower altitude than the broadly similar soils to the north and west, received lower levels of precipitation.<sup>48</sup> It is noteworthy that these very same districts boasted in the Middle Ages a number of features which distinguished them from the classic champion countysides of the clayland core of the Midlands – a partly dispersed pattern of settlement, and irregular field systems, similar in many respects to those found in the 'woodland' districts lying further to the south and east (see above, pp. 140–2). Their hydrological characteristics, derived from relatively thick layers of unsorted till, also allowed a greater degree of settlement dispersal than was customary in the scarp-and-vale countryside of the Midlands.

### *The management of meadows*

There may have been other circumstances in which the need for cooperation and close interaction at critical points in the farming year – points at which men and equipment had to be mobilised rapidly – encouraged farms to cluster together, rather than to disperse across the landscape. One was the need to manage extensive hay meadows. To make hay of reasonable quality, able to keep for long periods without deterioration, the water content of the cut grass needs to be reduced from c. 75 per cent to c. 15 per cent before

<sup>47</sup> M. J. Harrison, W. R. Mead, and D. J. Pannett, 'A Midland Ridge and Furrow Map', *Geographical Journal* 131 (1965), pp. 366–9.

<sup>48</sup> Hodge *et al.*, *Soils and their Uses*, pp. 209–12.



**Figure 34.** The distribution of meadow land in England, 1300–49, shown as the ratio of arable to meadow acreage (after B. Campbell, *English Seigneurial Agriculture*). Meadow was, in general, more abundant in the champion Midlands than in areas to the south-east or west (compare with Figure 20).

stacking. This is achieved by repeatedly turning it, in dry and preferably sunny weather. But the time for cutting needs to be carefully gauged, and a heavy summer shower, or longer period of rain, can put the process back almost to the start again. Hay meadows were thus most effectively managed where significant amounts of labour could be turned onto them at short

notice, and equipment (especially carts) could be shared rapidly between neighbours.<sup>49</sup> It would not be surprising, then, to discover an association between areas characterised by nucleated settlement and those in which areas of meadowland were extensive.

Areas of floodplain grassland were already being managed as meadows in the seventh century, to judge from the famous law of Ine which I have already discussed in relation to open fields (see above, p. 177).<sup>50</sup> Larger and larger areas of riverine grassland appear to have been managed in this way in the course of the Anglo-Saxon period, probably because the amount of winter browse and fodder (in the form of leafy hay) provided by wood-pastures was declining, as these degenerated over time to open grazing, and as more and more land was given over to arable.<sup>51</sup> At Yarnton in Oxfordshire there is clear evidence for a shift to the more intensive use of the floodplain as meadowland in the eighth century.<sup>52</sup> Domesday suggests that meadows were, in general, more abundant in the champion Midlands than elsewhere, although its record in this respect is characteristically inconsistent and in the circuit embracing Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and Warwickshire there appears to have been systematic under-recording.<sup>53</sup> A clearer picture emerges in later sources, such as the fourteenth-century *Inquisitions Post Mortem*. Bruce Campbell, mapping the evidence from these in detail, commented that

From Somerset and east Devon in the south-west to the Vale of Pickering in Yorkshire's North Riding in the north-east, it was in the clay vales of this broad diagonal band of country that meadowland was most consistently represented. Except on the wolds, few demesnes were without at least some meadow.<sup>54</sup>

The area so described, although Campbell himself did not make the point, is of course the champion heartland of Midland England (Figure 34). Rackham, who has also noted this association, has suggested that the systematic management of floodplains to produce hay came after the development of village settlement in this region: the practice 'developed more rapidly among the communal enterprise, villages and open-field farming of the Planned Countryside. In the "do-it-yourself" landscape of what is now Ancient Countryside, meadow was hardly beyond the experimental stage by 1086'.<sup>55</sup> More plausibly, the relationship between nucleated settlement and an abundance of meadowland was the other way round. That is, the need to organise labour and equipment at very short notice was a further encouragement to the clustering of farms as population increased and more land was brought into cultivation.

The concentration of meadows in the Midlands was unquestionably

<sup>49</sup> E. Kerridge, *The Farmers of Old England* (London, 1973), pp. 22–3; Robinson, *Fream's Elements of Agriculture*, pp. 286–7.

<sup>50</sup> Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 364.

<sup>51</sup> K. Biddick, *The Other Economy: Pastoral Economy on a Medieval Estate* (Berkeley, 1989), pp. 19–21.

<sup>52</sup> Hey, *Yarnton*, pp. 48–9.

<sup>53</sup> H. C. Darby, *Domesday England* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 147; Williamson, *Shaping Medieval Landscapes*, p. 168.

<sup>54</sup> Campbell, *English Seigneurial Agriculture*, pp. 75–6.

<sup>55</sup> Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, p. 335.



a consequence of environmental factors. Meadows were most effectively created on gravel or alluvial floodplains. The great Midland rivers – the Nene, Ouse, Welland, Trent, Severn and their principal tributaries – run, for the most part, parallel to the dips and scarps of the main geological formations, meandering slowly across the vales eroded into the softer rocks. They thus had broad well-watered floodplains of the required character. In ‘woodland’ districts, in contrast, areas suitable for making meadow were in general more limited. In some, watercourses were many but their floodplains narrow, as was the case with the ‘numerous streams which cross the London Clay’ in south Hertfordshire, south Essex and Middlesex, which ‘do not have well-developed flood-plains’.<sup>56</sup> Elsewhere, as in the Chilterns, ‘the absence of running water . . . away from the main valleys meant that meadows . . . were often scarce, or of poor quality, or both’,<sup>57</sup> while across much of East Anglia streams were sluggish, their gradients low, and floodplains often occupied by peat, giving rise to fen-like vegetation with much reed and sedge unsuitable for conversion to hay.<sup>58</sup> It is possible that the survival at the time of Domesday of large areas of wood-pasture in areas outside the Midlands in part reflects the paucity of hay meadows, and the need to provide grazing for livestock late into the year. Leaves and even twigs from shrubs and trees provide sustenance for sheep and cattle long after grass has ceased to grow.

Any association between nucleated settlement patterns and an abundance of land suitable for management as meadows has been dismissed by Jones and Page on the grounds that meadows can never have been ‘the principal settlement attractor’ in the Midlands because villages often lie some distance away from them.<sup>59</sup> This, however, is to misunderstand what was a perhaps poorly expressed argument. The management of meadows encouraged village settlement because it was easier to organise labour, equipment and so forth where people lived in reasonable proximity. That the meadows themselves might lie fifteen minutes’ walk away was a matter of less importance. Moreover, it is important to emphasise once again that the needs of the hay harvest were only one of several reasons why settlement tended to develop a nucleated form in the central areas of the country, compounding the influence, above all, of hydrology.

### *Folding*

One other important influence on the development of fields, and perhaps to a lesser extent settlement, was the practice of folding. On light land – chalk, limestones, and sands – farmsteads tended to cluster in the manner already

<sup>56</sup> Roden, ‘Field Systems of the Chiltern Hills’, p. 141.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>58</sup> Williamson, *Shaping Medieval Landscapes*, p. 172: see in particular the comments made about the poor quality of Norfolk meadows in Arthur Young’s *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Norfolk* (London, 1804), p. 170.

<sup>59</sup> Jones and Page, *English Villages*, p. 95.

described beside watercourses or along springlines. As a nucleated village developed and the area under cultivation expanded, holdings took the form of numerous intermixed strips, rather than elongated bands extending out from each farmstead. There were probably a number of reasons for this arrangement but one relates to the paramount importance of maintaining soil fertility on this light land, so easily leached of nutrients. The most efficient way of manuring was to pen sheep, grazed on the heaths and downs by day, tightly together each night in moveable folds. This would have been a difficult and labour-intensive procedure if each cultivator had carried it out himself on an individual basis, moving his own small flock every day from the open pastures to a fold erected on one of his scattered strips. In addition, as Kerridge has commented, the farmer would also have had 'all the lambing and shearing to attend to. All this would have preoccupied him to such an extent as to leave him little time for growing cereals'.<sup>60</sup>

Common flocks under the control of communal shepherds were an obvious solution to this problem, as small groups of farms expanded into larger villages. But it was also important to ensure that all who contributed to a common flock received their fair share of manure, and be seen so to do, as the fold was moved steadily across the arable land of the township. When decisions were made to create additional holdings, intermixed rather than discrete patterns would thus have been chosen, and over time the pattern of holdings reorganised – although generally with less regularity than in clayland countryside – in the direction of increasingly even and intermixed spreads of property, across which various forms of communal crop rotation were imposed, in order to create continuous blocks of strips under the same season, which could be conveniently grazed or folded in turn. But in addition, the movement of flocks, the erection of folds and the decisions required, often on a day-to-day basis, regarding the timing of farming operations relating to sowing and harvesting – all this would have necessitated regular contact between members of an emerging farming community, thus compounding hydrological factors and providing additional incentives for the close clustering of farmsteads. Not surprisingly, light, easily leached land was almost always champion country (Figure 33).

### *Conclusion*

A strong case can thus be made that, as settlement stabilised and then expanded in the course of the middle and later Saxon period, a range of environmental circumstances encouraged farms in certain districts to remain in close proximity, so that they developed in time into nucleated villages, while elsewhere such incentives to proximate living were muted or absent.

<sup>60</sup> Kerridge, *Common Fields of England*, p. 26. Kerridge's book, largely ignored by landscape historians, is a masterly analysis of the role of folding in the evolution of communal agriculture.

Differences in the extent of clustering or dispersal may be apparent from the time that settlements began to stabilise in middle Saxon times. There were certainly areas in which the density of settlements, the homes for the most part of peasant *ceorls*, was relatively high, and in which two or more sites were often to be found loosely clustered; others in which settlements were more scattered, following bands or ribbons of amenable land within less inviting terrain; and ones in which environmental factors discouraged settlement, and farms were thinly distributed. Subsequent centuries saw a more marked divergence of development, however, with both single farms and loose clusters growing into nucleated villages in some areas, but with a greater degree of settlement dispersal, continuing into the post-Conquest period, in others. The main factor influencing these varied trajectories was probably water supply, with nucleated settlement forms developing where supplies of water were only available at limited points, or where particular locations offered a supply superior in quality or quantity to that which could be contained elsewhere in the locality. Given the more general concern which is evident in the early-medieval landscape for fairness and equity in access to resources – as for example when land divided by inheritance was allotted in the form of subdivided fields – a desire to remain close to the best water source as farms proliferated is not perhaps surprising. But such hydrological encouragements to clustering were unquestionably compounded by agrarian and environmental factors: the need to coordinate the use of shared ploughs on difficult pelostagnogley soils, to manage alluvial meadows effectively, or to organise folding flocks. For geological reasons, all these factors were particularly strong in the scarp-and-dip landscapes of the Midland counties and on the chalklands of England, and this is precisely where settlement patterns consisting largely or entirely of nucleated villages eventually emerged.

The clustering of farms would in itself probably have led to the development of a pattern of holdings which were extensively intermixed across the surrounding landscape, and thus to increasing levels of cooperation amongst farmers. But such arrangements were also directly encouraged by co-aration and the organisation of folding flocks. Both practices led to the eventual reorganisation of many field systems into more ordered and regular forms, a development which was perhaps mainly concentrated in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The most structured systems were found on the heaviest clays, probably reflecting the fact that plough-sharing and the routines of communal agriculture more generally in these challenging environments served to create especially close-knit communities, for whom issues of fairness and equity were of particular importance, and who thus desired to see a close match between the obligations owed by each assessed unit of land, in terms of manorial dues and state taxation, and its productive capacity. Once again we see how variations in the natural environment helped to shape the character of rural communities in early-medieval England, as much as that of the landscapes which they inhabited.

## Woodland and Pasture

### *Introduction*

Some readers may be sceptical about the arguments set out over the previous chapters not so much because of the evidence there presented relating to fields and farms, but rather because of the character of certain other aspects of England's medieval landscapes. In particular, we are accustomed to hearing how 'woodland' areas must have been colonised later than champion ones, and must always have lagged behind them in terms of agrarian development, because they were characterised by extensive tracts of common grazing and woodland. Indeed, these are still sometimes treated by historians as little more than environments awaiting transformation into cultivated land, in spite of the light that has been thrown in recent decades on such matters as the sophisticated nature of medieval woodland management.<sup>1</sup> As we have seen, there is little evidence that champion landscapes were actually characterised by a paucity of common grazing. On the contrary: in many heathland and downland areas the commons were particularly extensive. But the association of 'woodland' landscapes, and a relative abundance of woods, is more clearly established. The notion that this reflects the fact that the process of colonisation was slow and never fully completed in such districts is an old one, going back to some of the earliest writers on landscape history, but it has been given particular prominence in recent decades by writers like Brian Roberts and Stuart Wrathmell, and by Oliver Rackham, who have emphasised the broad correlation between 'woodland' regions and areas which were both well-wooded at the time of Domesday and which can boast a high proportion of place-names containing elements relating to woodland or its clearance.<sup>2</sup> There is thus, in the words of Roberts and Wrathmell, a clear relationship between 'regions of late surviving Anglo-Saxon woodland and nineteenth-century dispersed settlement on the one hand and, on the other, regions of open land and nucleated settlement'.<sup>3</sup> They have further suggested that this was a pattern largely inherited by Saxon farmers, not one created by them.<sup>4</sup> Already extensively cleared of woodland by the end of

<sup>1</sup> Most notably Oliver Rackham: *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* (London, 1976); *Woodlands* (London, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, pp. 75–84.

<sup>3</sup> Roberts and Wrathmell, 'Peoples of Wood and Plain', p. 88; Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, pp. 75–84.

<sup>4</sup> Roberts and Wrathmell, 'Peoples of Wood and Plain', p. 95.

the Roman period, it was here that arable land use became most extensive in Saxon times, eventually leading to a shortage of pasture and thus to the kind of crisis of resources which Thirsk and others have argued was critical in the development of champion landscapes.

### *Types of woodland and grazing*

One obvious problem with the suggestion that an abundance of woodland can be equated in a straightforward and unproblematic fashion with a paucity of cultivated ground is that Domesday makes it clear that there was no real correlation between the two. There were many areas in Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk which possessed considerably more woodland than most champion districts, yet also boasted more ploughs and more people. In part this was for the simple reason that there were other types of uncultivated land in early-medieval England.<sup>5</sup> Old English and early post-Conquest documents describe a number of varieties of such unwooded, unploughed ground. Heaths were extensive in areas of poor, acid soils and comprised open landscapes dominated by heather, gorse and other undershrubs. They were not natural environments, or at least, they were maintained in their largely treeless state by human exploitation. Heaths were intensively grazed, especially by sheep but also by cattle (and in places, after the Norman Conquest, by rabbits); and they were regularly cut for fuel, fencing and thatching materials, fodder and animal bedding.<sup>6</sup> By the time we first encounter them in documents most heaths, like most other areas of non-arable land, were exploited as common land by communities or groups of neighbouring communities. Heaths were defined by the Anglo-Saxons in much the same way as we would define them today – the term *hæð* means both heath and heather – but other Old English terms have changed their meaning significantly. *Mor* for example was more widely employed than the modern ‘moor’, embracing not only heather-dominated landscapes similar in some ways to heaths, but found in areas of upland peat, but also other tracts of open grazing, often located on damp and low-lying ground.<sup>7</sup> Other extensive areas of open grazing could be found on chalk downland, again kept free of trees by regular exploitation.

By the high Middle Ages the more extensive tracts of unploughed ground were found where large areas of waterlogged, acidic, thin or otherwise infertile soils occurred. Elsewhere their area appears to have contracted steadily through the late Saxon and into the post-Conquest period in favour of arable. Nevertheless, in the thirteenth century some grazing land usually survived even in the most densely settled parts of England. Here it frequently took the form of long chains or ribbons which rambled through the cultivated ground:

<sup>5</sup> Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*, pp. 144–6.

<sup>6</sup> J. Parry, *Heathland* (London, 2003); Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, pp. 282–306; T. Williamson, *Rabbits, Warrens and Archaeology* (London, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, p. 305; M. Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape* (London, 1984), pp. 54–6.

areas of common grazing, sometimes of varied environmental character, which were directly joined or connected by wide droveways. Patterns like these could be found in champion districts as much as in 'woodland' ones: there was little real difference between the bands of pasture running through the open fields of western Northamptonshire, and the chains of greens and commons found in a county like Norfolk (Figure 35). Both were the residual fragments of once more extensive tracts of waste, now restricted to particularly infertile or poorly draining areas. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the boundaries of such areas often coincided with those of parishes or townships (Figure 36). That is, while in general terms pastures and other unploughed ground came to occupy the more marginal land in any district, in detail their bounds were the consequence of human decisions, and areas which one community considered not worth cultivating their neighbours were evidently prepared to keep in tilth.

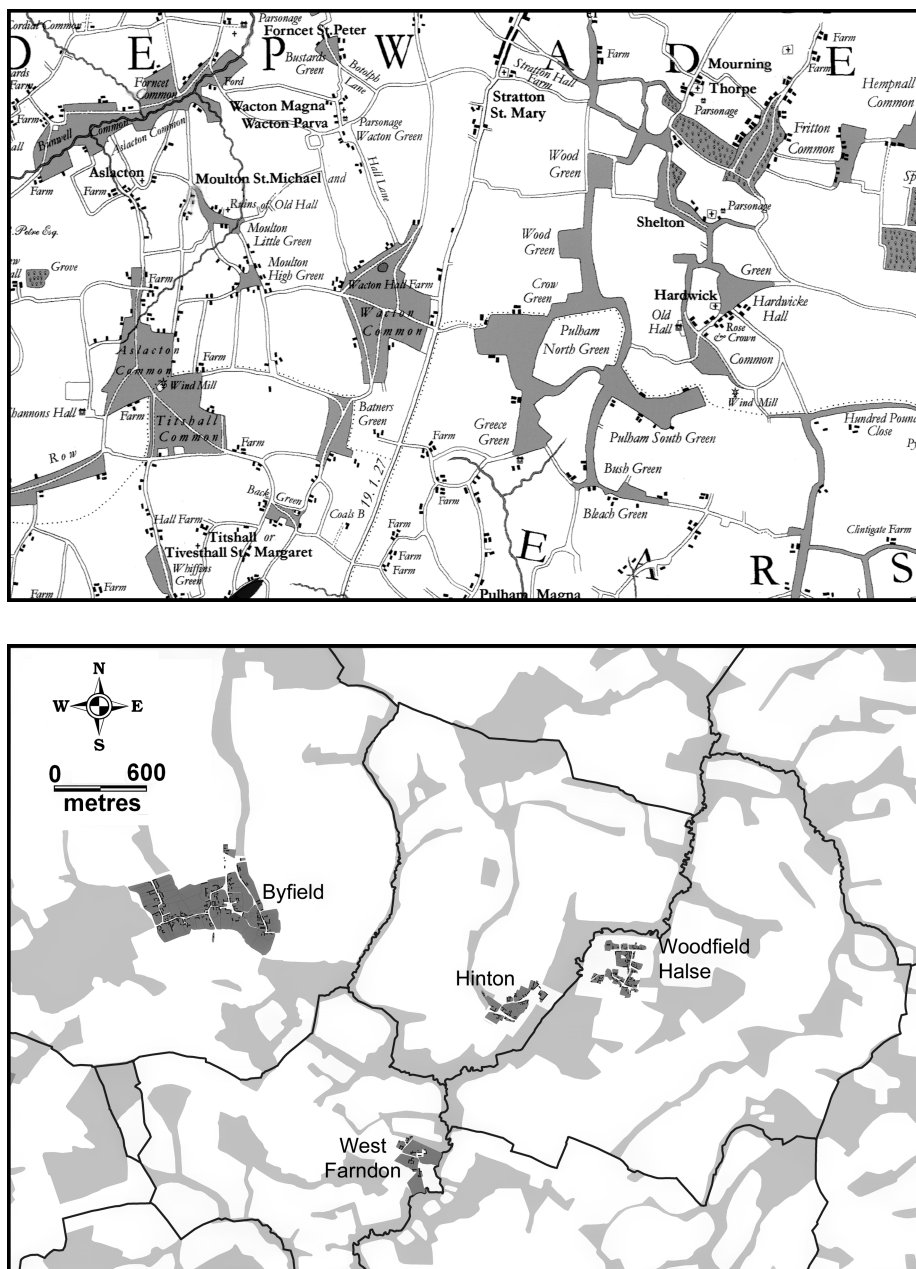
In contrast to these essentially open, treeless environments were various forms of wooded ground. By the thirteenth century many woods were managed as coppice-with-standards: that is, most of the trees and bushes within them were cut down to near ground level on a rotation of between seven and fifteen years in order to provide a regular crop of poles, pieces of straight wood which could be used for firewood, fencing, tools, the lighter scantling components of timber-framed buildings, and much else.<sup>8</sup> After cutting, the plants regenerated vigorously from the stump or *stool*, or suckered from the rootstock. Such woods contained relatively few standard (full-grown) trees, for if these had been numerous the canopy shade would have suppressed the growth of the underwood beneath, and the need for wood usually far outstripped the demand for timber. Standard trees were normally felled at around eighty to a hundred years of age, when their growth rate began to decline and they were of suitable size to be used in the construction of buildings or, more rarely, ships. The coppice stools were vulnerable to browsing livestock and it was partly for this reason that ancient woods are invariably bounded by substantial banks and ditches, the former originally topped by some kind of fence or hedge. Almost invariably, woods were private property, part of the manorial demesne.

So far as the evidence goes, the amount of woodland enclosed and managed by coppicing in this manner increased in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as growing population pressed on resources. A document of 1226 thus describes how the lord of the manor of Bradenham in Norfolk had 'about the wood. . . raised one earthwork for the livestock, lest they eat up the younger wood'.<sup>9</sup> In pre-Conquest times the vast majority of woodland had instead taken the form of wood-pasture, that is, it lacked a managed understorey and was regularly grazed by livestock, including pigs. The fact that, in many parts of the country, Domesday habitually records

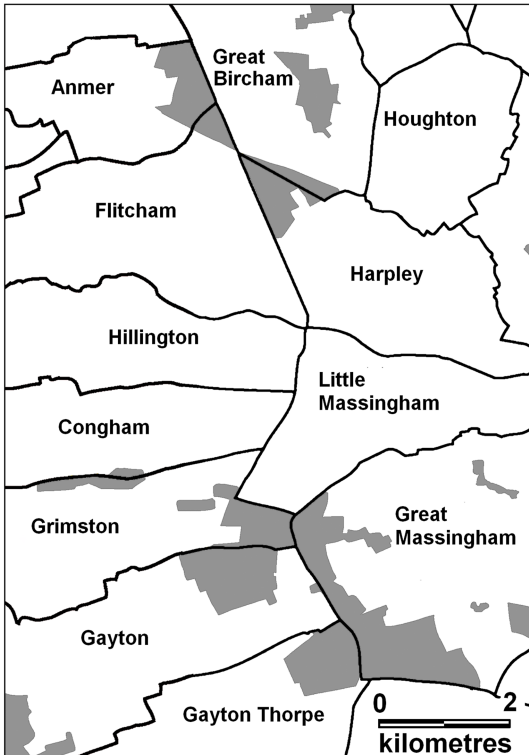
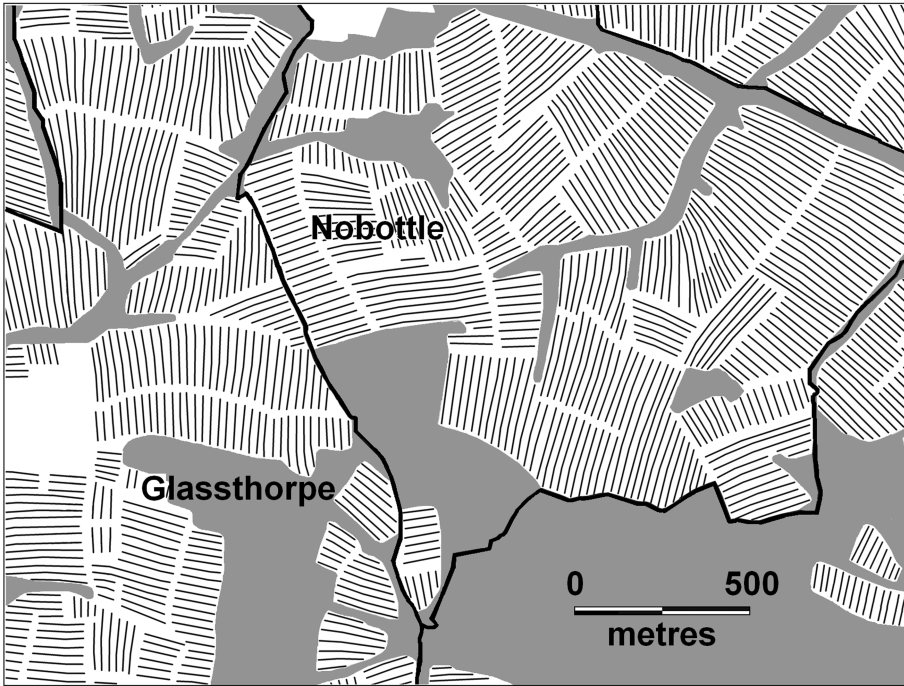
<sup>8</sup> Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*; Rackham, *Woodlands*.

<sup>9</sup> O. Rackham, 'The Ancient Woods of Norfolk', *Transactions of the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society* 27 (1986), pp. 161-77.





**Figure 35.** Even in the high Middle Ages the landscapes of the champion Midlands and those of ‘woodland’ districts often had more in common than historians sometimes assume. The configuration of common land around Hardwick in south Norfolk (as shown on William Faden’s county map of 1797) (above) and of pasture in western Northamptonshire, around Byfield and Hinton (below).



**Figure 36.** The relationship between township boundaries and common land. Above: in Harpole, Nobottle and Glassthorpe, Northamptonshire (common pasture reconstructed from *lacunae* in the distribution of ridge and furrow). Below: in west Norfolk (as shown on William Faden's county map of 1797).

the amount of woodland present on each manor in terms of the numbers of swine that could be fed there, on the autumn pannage, is itself powerful evidence for this. But 'wood-pasture' is a very poorly defined term, and one rather loosely applied not only by historians but also by historical ecologists. There were, for example, important variations in the density of tree cover, variations which raise questions of definition – at what point do we describe an area as a wood-pasture, rather than as an open pasture across which a few trees are thinly scattered? There were also variations in the intensity of management and exploitation. At one extreme there were extensive tracts of woodland, grazed by flocks and herds but not very intensively managed for the production of wood. At the other there were the kinds of wood-pasture which we encounter in later-medieval and post-medieval times, in which the majority of trees were systematically pollarded, that is, cut in the manner of coppice stools but at a height of around 2–3 metres, raised on a trunk or *bolting* out of reach of browsing animals. Many of these areas comprised common land.<sup>10</sup> But some were private, in which case they were often deer parks – venison farms and hunting grounds which had been enclosed from the common woods with banks, ditches and fences more substantial than those around coppiced woods.<sup>11</sup>

Even in the tenth and eleventh centuries wood-pastures appear in many parts of England to have been valued and managed environments which provided much of the grazing for sheep and cattle. But woods were particularly important as swine pastures, and pigs and their management loom large in middle and late Saxon documents. In areas where large tracts of woodland existed they were often dotted with outlying ranches where pigs were fattened at certain times of the year. The most famous such area is the Weald of Kent, but specialised swine-pastures could be found in many districts.<sup>12</sup> The will of the noblewoman Æthelgifu, drawn up around 970 and dealing with far-flung estates in Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire, bequeathed a herd of swine 'and the swineherd with it' at *Achurst* in Aldenham in Hertfordshire, another herd at *Langford*, a herd and its swineherd at *Standon*, and what appear to have been two separate herds at *Gaddesden*, while land at *Tewin* was given 'as swine-pasture'. Pigs were also included in the food-rents she bequeathed to various churches and minsters.<sup>13</sup> Pigs, presumably grazed at least in part in the abbey's extensive woods on the claylands of south Hertfordshire, formed a major element of the diet of the Saxon monks at St Albans. No less than 66 per cent of the bones recovered during the excavations of the chapter house (in a context dating from some time between the fifth and ninth centuries) were from pigs.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, pp. 119–52; P. Dallas, 'Sustainable Environments: Common Wood Pastures in Norfolk', *Landscape History* 31/1 (2010), pp. 23–36.

<sup>11</sup> The best recent study of medieval parks is R. Liddiard (ed.), *The Medieval Park: New Perspectives* (Macclesfield, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> K. P. Witney, *The Jutish Forest* (London, 1976); K. P. Witney, 'The Woodland Economy of Kent, 1066–1348', *Agricultural History Review* 38 (1990), pp. 20–39.

<sup>13</sup> Crick, *Charters of St Albans*, no. 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

Æthelgifu also left significant bequests to her huntsman Wulfric, and it is probable that deer parks, rather than being simply a Norman introduction, existed in some form in later Saxon England.<sup>15</sup> Domesday records a number of examples, but these may have been created in the immediate aftermath of the Conquest. More intriguing are the features called *hagas* which are mentioned in the boundary clauses of charters in many districts.<sup>16</sup> It has been suggested that this term, often translated simply as 'hedge' or 'enclosure', had the specialised meaning of fences for concentrating or corralling deer, or even for enclosures in which deer were kept – features similar if not identical to later parks.<sup>17</sup> But while woods were thus used for keeping and feeding a wide range of livestock, they also supplied wood, especially for use as fuel. Late Saxon charters and wills make frequent references to the supply of firewood. When Siflæd, an early-eleventh-century Norfolk landowner, made provision prior to going 'across the sea' – probably on a pilgrimage – she granted to the village church in Marlingford 'five acres and one homestead and two acres of meadow and two wagonloads of wood . . . And I grant to each of my brothers a wagonload of wood'.<sup>18</sup>

Such intensive but varied uses of tracts of woodland, and the active assertion of property rights over and within them, explains why the perambulation clauses of Anglo-Saxon charters, even when describing boundaries running through very remote areas of wooded ground, nevertheless refer frequently to gates, banks, hedges and other features. The bounds of Aldenham in south Hertfordshire, for example, set out in a charter of uncertain but evidently pre-Conquest date, ran from the well-drained land by the River Colne southwards to the county boundary with Middlesex, passing through remote wooded country apparently distant from any settlement.<sup>19</sup> Yet even at the furthest extremities of the estate the boundary marks included the 'gate to the hazel wood', the *fulen gate* or 'dirty gate', and a hedge. The bounds of Oxhey, a few kilometres to the west, set out in a charter of 1007,<sup>20</sup> similarly included – again within the unsettled country near the county boundary – a *wudwyrðe* ('enclosure in the wood') and *mapuldeorgeat* ('deer gate made of maple wood', suggesting perhaps some feature like a deer leap: *geat* often means something like 'gap in a fence or bank through which only particular animals could pass').<sup>21</sup>

### *The instability of woodland*

Woods, principally in the form of wood-pastures, were thus only one of several kinds of non-arable land use in Anglo-Saxon England. Woodland

<sup>15</sup> R. Liddiard, 'The Deer Parks of Domesday Book', *Landscapes* 4 (2003), pp. 4–23.

<sup>16</sup> Hooke, 'Woodland Landscape', pp. 165–71.

<sup>17</sup> Liddiard, 'Deer Parks of Domesday Book'.

<sup>18</sup> D. Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, nos. 37 and 38.

<sup>19</sup> M. Gelling, *Early Charters of the Thames Valley*, p. 80; Gover, Mawer and Stenton, *Place-Names of Hertfordshire*, pp. 59–60.

<sup>20</sup> Crick, *Charters of St Albans*, no. 12.

<sup>21</sup> A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, vol. I (Cambridge, 1956), p. 198.

constituted an economically valuable environment, used in a host of ways, not an under-utilised wilderness. Yet at the same time woods were inherently unstable environments, vulnerable to destruction through exploitation as much as from deliberate clearance. Trees in wood-pastures were always susceptible to damage from sheep and cattle, and to the depredations of browsing pigs. Once a tree was felled, moreover, or brought down in the wind, a replacement was unlikely to regenerate in its place because of grazing pressure, especially in situations in which thorny underwood, within which seedlings might be protected from livestock, was being regularly removed for fuel.<sup>22</sup>

Not surprisingly, it is the vulnerability more than the ubiquity of trees and woods which is suggested by a number of documentary sources. A law of Ine of Wessex, drawn up around 690, thus laid down that:

If anyone destroys a tree in a wood by a fire and it becomes known who did it, he shall pay a full fine; he shall pay 60 shillings, because fire is a thief. If anyone fells a large number of trees in a wood, and it afterwards becomes known, he shall pay 30 shillings for each of three trees. He need not pay more, however many there may be, because the axe is an informer and not a thief. If, however, anyone cuts down a tree that can shelter thirty swine, and it becomes known, he shall pay 60 shillings.<sup>23</sup>

The extent to which woodland could degenerate to various forms of open land in the course of the Saxon period should not be underestimated. The heaths found on the dry, acid soils of coastal east Suffolk – the district called the ‘Sandlings’ – are a good example. This long, narrow tract of light sandy soils was fairly densely settled in the middle Saxon period, and its southern portion formed the heartland of the *Wuffingas*, the family which became the first kings of East Anglia.<sup>24</sup> Their ‘palace’ at Rendlesham was located here, together with their burial ground at Sutton Hoo, overlooking the estuary of the River Deben. The only significant area of ancient woodland in the district is located nearby. This is the famous Staverton Park, which extends over c. 80 hectares on the boundary between the parishes of Wantisden and Eyke. It is an ancient wood-pasture, characterised by close-set pollarded oaks which were managed in the traditional manner, cropped at intervals of ten to twenty years, into the eighteenth century.<sup>25</sup> The park is first mentioned in 1268 but almost certainly has much earlier origins. Indeed, the fact that it lies a mere 3 kilometres to the south-east of Rendlesham is unlikely to be coincidental, and Staverton may well have originated as the hunting ground, enclosed or otherwise, of the East Anglian kings.

<sup>22</sup> F. Vera, *Grazing Ecology and Forest History* (Wallingford, 2002), p. 185.

<sup>23</sup> Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 365.

<sup>24</sup> M. Carver, *Sutton Hoo. Burial ground of Kings?* (London, 1998); J. Newman, ‘The Late Roman and Anglo-Saxon Settlement Patterns in the Sandlings of Suffolk’, in M. Carver (ed.), *The Age of Sutton Hoo: The Seventh Century in North-Western Europe* (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 25–38; Williamson, *Sutton Hoo and its Landscape*.

<sup>25</sup> G. E. Peterken, ‘The Development of Vegetation in Staverton Park’, *Field Studies* 2 (1968), pp. 1–39; R. Hoppitt, ‘The Development of Deer Parks in Suffolk from the Eleventh to the Seventeenth Century’, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of East Anglia, 1992.



In 1601 the area was depicted on John Norden's survey of the Stanhope estates, which very clearly shows the marked contrast between the densely timbered park and the surrounding heathland, which was completely bleak and treeless.<sup>26</sup> But the park boundary did not correspond with any change in soil type, suggesting that trees survived here, but disappeared from the surrounding landscape, because of grazing pressure and over-exploitation: the heaths were common, the park was not. It is striking, in this context, how many of the major place-names in the district have strong woodland associations. Hollesley, to the south of Staverton, is thus 'The clearing in the hollow'; nearby Butley means 'Butta's woodland clearing' or 'the woodland clearing by a mound'; Ramsholt is the 'wild garlic wood' (OE *hramsas*, wild garlic); while the lost Domesday vill of *Culeslea* (probably on the higher, heathier portion of the parish of Alderton) is 'Cula's woodland clearing' and Stockerland, a vill now lying within the parish of Sutton, is probably a compound of Old English (or Old Norse) *stocc*, 'tree stump', and the Old Norse *lundr*, 'wood'. As Arnott commented in 1946, 'It would seem . . . that East Suffolk may once have been a district of forest land rather than open heath'.<sup>27</sup> Even more examples of minor names with woodland associations are recorded on the early maps of the area. Norden's 1601 survey, for example, shows tracts of heathland called 'Cokesley Pitt' (*cocces lēah*, 'the woodland clearing of the wood-cock'; 'Hasellande Dale' (*hæsel land*, 'land grown with hazels', or *hæsel lundr*, 'hazel wood'); together with an area, not far from Staverton Park, simply labelled 'Woodlande'. Norden's map is a particularly useful source because the location of the various places to which these names refer is clear. Late-medieval surveys likewise record many names with woodland associations but the places to which these refer can seldom be identified with certainty. An extent for Rendlesham thus refers to Tunley ('the farm clearing'), Wrangtunley and Overtunley, Northwood Croft and Netherwood Croft. Some, however, can be identified: Hatchley Barn in Bromeswell, shown on the first edition Ordnance Survey 6" map but which has since disappeared, is thus the *Hachlea* (Hæc's clearing) of 1454.<sup>28</sup> The clear implication of all these names is that in early Saxon times the heaths of east Suffolk, far from being open and treeless environments, were to a significant extent wooded, and that this situation changed in the course of the middle and later Saxon periods as a result of felling and grazing. Domesday suggests that by the end of the Saxon period there was little woodland in the district.

The Sandlings were not unique, and felling and grazing, rather than deliberate assarting to make way for arable land, probably accounts for the destruction by the thirteenth century of much of the woodland recorded in early place-names, or in Domesday Book. Conversely, in many cases the expansion of cultivation may have been at the expense of relatively open ground, rather than dense woodland, especially given that pressure on trees

<sup>26</sup> East Suffolk Record Office, IRO V5/22/1: Survey of the Estates of Sir John Stanhope, 1601, by John Norden.

<sup>27</sup> W. G. Arnott, *The Place-Names of the Deben Valley Parishes* (Ipswich, 1946), p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.



must have been greatest in those parts of the waste nearest to settlements and fields.

*The character and antiquity of Saxon woodland*

Much woodland thus disappeared in the course of the middle and later Saxon periods. Nevertheless, I do not mean to suggest that early Saxon England had been characterised by extensive and continuous tracts of dense forest, of the kind which features on the maps presented in some of the older text books. Woodland was abundant but it was discontinuous, full of glades and open areas, often not very densely timbered and, as already emphasised, frequently in danger of degenerating to open ground. Indeed, this had probably long been the case. Even before the adoption of farming in England from c. 4000 BC Mesolithic hunter-gatherers had made significant modifications to the natural vegetation, clearing ground, or extending existing natural clearings, to concentrate game and facilitate hunting.<sup>29</sup> 'Neolithic culture . . . did not emerge onto a virginal stage, but rather one that had been subjected to ongoing modification by at least two millennia of hunter-gatherers'.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, more intensive modifications of the natural vegetation unquestionably occurred with the start of the Neolithic. Initial clearances for agriculture were limited, and at times reversed, but by early Bronze Age times there were extensive areas of completely open land, especially on the chalk uplands of southern and eastern England, while from the middle Bronze Age a shift away from pastoralism to mixed farming was associated with an acceleration of deforestation, which continued and intensified, albeit with localised phases of regeneration, into the Iron Age.<sup>31</sup> By the Roman period, as I have already noted, settlement was widespread on almost all soils types, and while large tracts of well-wooded ground unquestionably survived, as in Blackdown Forest or the Forest of Dean, the landscape was a largely open one, generally used for mixed farming but with some evidence for regional specialisation in cereals or livestock.<sup>32</sup> The extent of woodland regeneration in the immediate post-Roman period remains contentious, in part because there was much regional or even local variation. Nevertheless, in south-west England as much as in the south-east, palaeoenvironmental evidence for regeneration is localised and limited.<sup>33</sup> In the north there is more evidence for regeneration, possibly because the intensity of agriculture had here been stimulated by the need to feed military garrisons. But on the whole

<sup>29</sup> G. W. Dimbleby, *The Development of British Heathlands and their Soils* (Oxford, 1962).

<sup>30</sup> K. Wilkinson and V. Straker, 'Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Environmental Background', in C. J. Webster (ed.), *The Archaeology of South West England: South West England Archaeological Research Framework* (Taunton, 2007), pp. 63–74, at p. 72.

<sup>31</sup> P. Fowler, *The Farming of Prehistoric Britain* (Cambridge, 1983); F. Pryor, *Farmers in Prehistoric Britain* (Stroud, 1998).

<sup>32</sup> P. Dark, *The Environment of Britain in the First Millennium AD* (London, 2000), pp. 81–129; V. Straker, A. Brown, R. Fyfe and J. Jones, 'Romano-British Environmental Background', in Webster (ed.), *The Archaeology of South West England*, pp. 145–50, at p. 149.

<sup>33</sup> Dark, *Environment of Britain*, pp. 130–56; Rippon, *Beyond the Medieval Village*, pp. 121–2; 168–9.

there is little evidence for the wholesale return of woodland, presumably because, as in the period following the Black Death in the fourteenth century, demographic decline was accompanied not by the complete abandonment of land, but by an expansion in pastoral farming.

In most districts the early Anglo-Saxons were not, therefore, either managing or clearing very extensive and continuous tracts of woodland. Much woodland had disappeared in prehistoric and Roman times and while large areas survived, and some regenerated in the post-Roman period, woods had been exploited for centuries with varying degrees of intensity for wood, timber and above all grazing. In Essex, classic woodland countryside, Roman settlement and clearance had been widespread, and 'the palaeoenvironmental, documentary and place-name evidence indicates that widespread woodland regeneration in the post-Roman period did not occur. By the tenth century, parish boundary morphology and the practice of enclaving suggest that woodland resources were already unevenly distributed and limited in extent'.<sup>34</sup>

Even if fifth- and sixth-century farmers had been faced with a virgin wilderness it is very uncertain whether this would anyway have consisted of dense, impenetrable woodland. Oliver Rackham suggested in 1986 that some areas of more open ground must have existed as part of the country's natural climax vegetation.<sup>35</sup> But such ideas were taken much further by the Dutch ecologist Frans Vera. In an influential book published in 2000 he noted that throughout central and western Europe pollen evidence suggests that oak (both pedunculate and sessile) and hazel formed a major component of the pre-Neolithic vegetation. Neither of these species, however, regenerates well under closed canopy conditions. This indicates, according to Vera, the existence of a more open landscape in which extensive areas were kept free of trees by the grazing of large herbivores such as bison, aurochs (wild cattle) and various species of deer.<sup>36</sup> Our modern ideas about Europe's natural vegetation, he further argued, were largely based on the kinds of environment experienced by early settlers on the east coast of America, on observed patterns of succession on land abandoned in parts of England during the agricultural depression of the early twentieth century, and on the character of the remaining woods and forests across Europe, generally assumed to represent surviving fragments of the natural vegetation. All these supposed analogies were misleading because they came from contexts in which the grazing of large herds of herbivores had long been curtailed.

Vera conceded that the pollen evidence appeared at first sight to support the idea of extensive and continuous tree cover, showing as it did a massive predominance of tree pollen over NAP (non-arboreal pollen).<sup>37</sup> But he argued that intensive grazing would have 'limited the flowering of grasses, and

<sup>34</sup> B. Morris, 'The Roman to Medieval Transition in the Essex Landscape: A Study in Persistence, Continuity and Change', *Medieval Settlement Research Group Annual Report 20* (2005), pp. 37–44.

<sup>35</sup> Rackham, *Ancient Woodland*, pp. 108–9; Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, p. 330.

<sup>36</sup> Vera, *Grazing Ecology and Forest History*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

thus the pollen emitted by grass into the atmosphere'; while the movement of grass and herb pollen, he further speculated, might have been constrained by the fact that the landscape, while essentially open, nevertheless included scattered trees and areas of dense scrub.<sup>38</sup> Conversely, he suggested that trees like oak and lime growing in fairly open, park-like conditions actually emit more pollen than those densely crowded as continuous woodland, leading to their over-representation in the pollen record. Yet Vera did not merely explain away the apparent dominance of trees by reinterpreting the pollen evidence. He also used the latter skilfully in support of his theory, noting the frequency in pollen cores of various types of plant (in addition to oak and hazel) which are characteristic of woodland-edge conditions, including both small trees and shrubs such as blackthorn, hawthorn, rowan, cherry, apple and pear, and herbs such as mugwort, nettle and sorrel. He also pointed out that the abundance of hazel pollen was hard to square with an environment of dense and continuous woodland, because that species does not flower, or hardly flowers, under a closed canopy – again suggesting large areas of scrub or other woodland-edge conditions.<sup>39</sup>

Instead of closed-canopy forest, Vera therefore proposed a pre-clearance environment that was both open and dynamic, a park-like landscape with a mixture of open ground, scattered with trees, together with areas of thorny scrub within which denser stands of trees could develop, protected from grazing. These grew up, eventually shading out the thorns below, by which time they would themselves have been relatively immune to the effects of browsing herbivores.<sup>40</sup> The stands gradually grew more open, as individual specimens decayed through age or disease, or were outcompeted by neighbours. Grasses and herbs consequently increased in number and over time the grove became open ground. In short, the natural vegetation of central and western Europe was

A mosaic of grassland, scrub, trees and groves in which large plant-eating mammals played an essential role in the process of the regeneration of trees and had a determining effect on the succession of species of trees. In addition, there was closed forest in certain places, mainly those inaccessible to the large ungulates.<sup>41</sup>

Vera's views have not found universal acceptance. Rackham for example has argued that the behaviour of oak in respect to deep shade may have changed with the arrival of American oak mildew disease in comparatively recent times, and that reading the present behaviour of this species into the remote past can thus prove misleading.<sup>42</sup> In a recent review of the arguments and evidence Kathy Hodder and her colleagues commented: 'We agree that the openness of the [pre-Neolithic] landscape and the role of large herbivores have both been underplayed in past discussions, but conclude that Vera's

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 377–9.

<sup>41</sup> F. Vera, 'The Dynamic European Forest', *Arboricultural Journal* 26 (2002), pp. 179–211, at p. 201.

<sup>42</sup> O. Rackham, *Ancient Woodland*, Rrvised edn (Colvend, 2003), pp. 502–3.

argument – that the bulk of the lowland landscape was half-open and driven by large herbivores – is not currently supported by the evidence'.<sup>43</sup> One particular problem is that we do not actually know the density of large herbivores in the remote past and it is quite probable that their numbers were kept in check by human predation (which had, after all, at the end of the last glaciation been responsible in whole or in part for the complete extinction of a number of species, including the mammoth and woolly rhinoceros). Nevertheless, much of Vera's argument remains appealing, not least because it would help explain why most of our native flora comprises not woodland species, but ones characteristic of open habitats. Vera may have taken his arguments too far but, as Rackham himself acknowledged before the appearance of Vera's book, there very probably were many tracts of relatively open land in pre-Neolithic Britain, even if less numerous and extensive than Vera has argued.

It is perhaps worth considering where such areas might have been found – and conversely, where the denser tracts of woodland are likely to have been located. To judge from modern analogies, especially in the wilder parts of north America, the denser stands will have been concentrated on steeper slopes and in particular in areas more remote from water sources. Conversely, the more open ground will have been found close to streams and rivers, where grazing animals congregate and where particular species, most notably the beaver, have a particularly strong impact on the vegetation. It is thus possible that Everett's distinction between river and wold – between open valley and forested upland – may to some extent have had a natural origin.

### *The naming of woods*

Perhaps the most useful evidence for the character and the extent of Anglo-Saxon woodland, and for the wide variety of wooded environments, is provided by place-names.<sup>44</sup> The Anglo-Saxons had a number of terms for woodland but their precise significance often remains contested. Meanings clearly changed over time, while some terms may have had a range of meanings even at the same time. The term *wudu*, 'wood', was thus sometimes used at an early date to describe very extensive tracts of afforested ground, such as the Shire Wood in Nottingham, which became Sherwood Forest; or the Wychwood, 'the wood of the *Hwicce*', in the west Midlands.<sup>45</sup> But most place-names featuring *wudu* seem to refer to more restricted areas, many of which were apparently enclosed and owned or controlled by single

<sup>43</sup> K. Hodder, P. Buckland, K. Kirby and J. Bullock, 'Can the Pre-Neolithic Provide Suitable Models for Re-wilding the Landscape in Britain', *British Wildlife* 20/5 (special supplement) (2009), pp. 4–15, at p. 12.

<sup>44</sup> The best discussions of woodland place-names are to be found in M. Gelling and A. Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Stamford, 2000); Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape*; D. Hooke, *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England* (Leicester, 1998); D. Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2010); Rackham, *Ancient Woodland*, pp. 127–30.

<sup>45</sup> Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 123.

individuals, for around a quarter have personal names as a prefix, the vast majority of which – no less than 90 per cent – refer to individual people, rather than to wider social groups.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, only a small number of these names – around 7 per cent – include terms for particular tree species, and there are few apparent references to other kinds of vegetation. Where the names of animals are compounded with *wudu* these are usually wild rather than domestic in character, and also small in size – hares, jackdaws, shrews – rather than larger species like deer or wild boar. The term *wudu* thus appears, when used in major place-names, to have meant a wood much as we would understand it today – a defined and sometimes enclosed area with trees and perhaps a coppiced understorey: a wood, that is, rather than a wood-pasture. Some of the many places called ‘Woodton’ or ‘Woodham’ may represent settlements located beside, and involved to some extent in managing, such areas within wider and perhaps less densely timbered tracts of waste. The term *graf*, ‘grove’, is in many ways similar, used at an early date for extensive tracts of wooded ground (Bromswold in Northamptonshire and Huntingdonshire) but later for smaller, perhaps enclosed portions of woodland, some perhaps managed by coppicing.<sup>47</sup>

The significance of the term *holt* is more difficult to understand, largely because this appears in far fewer place-names – around a quarter of the number which feature *wudu*. Unlike the latter, *holt* sometimes appears as a simplex name – Holt in north Norfolk, for example – and there are again indications that it was used in early Saxon times for extensive tracts of woodland, and only later for more restricted areas. The Norfolk Holt was thus the name for both a royal manor which became a medieval town, and for an associated hundred, and it lay within an area of acid heathland which carried much wood-pasture even in post-medieval times.<sup>48</sup> It has been argued that *holts*, whether large or small, were dominated by single species of tree, and it is noteworthy that around 30 per cent of the prefixes attached to such names do indeed refer to a particular species – far more than is the case with the other woodland terms used in major place-names.<sup>49</sup> Some *holts* may have been coppiced, to judge from names like Sparsholt, referring to the production of spars or spears.

Names featuring the element *hyrst* are more numerous but are rather different in character, as they refer not to a wooded area *per se* but to a hill that was covered in trees. Some of the prefixes attached to the seventy or so major names of this type may thus refer to the hill itself, rather than to the woodland growing upon it: and we might expect attributes experienced from a distance to have loomed larger in the minds of those coining these names than aspects such as use or ownership. There is no evidence that the term was ever used

<sup>46</sup> An estimate based on the major names listed by the University of Nottingham ‘Place Name Key’: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~aezins/kepn>.

<sup>47</sup> Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 127.

<sup>48</sup> G. Barnes and T. Williamson, *Ancient Trees in the Landscape: Norfolk’s Arboreal Heritage* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 104–10.

<sup>49</sup> Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 128; Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of Place-Names*, p. 233.

in a regional sense, for extensive tracts of early woodland, for while there are a high proportion of simplex names (sometimes with a post-Conquest feudal qualifier, the name of a family that came to own the manor – such as Hurstpierpoint in Sussex) none seem to be related to large administrative units like hundreds. Viewed at a distance, the trees dominating a *hyrst* were important in distinguishing it – around a quarter of these names appear to have the name of a tree as their prefix – but only around a fifth are defined in terms of an owner's name, and little more than a sixth by association with wild animals. These are mainly wild species, including deer, but some are domestic, suggesting that some *hyrsts* were grazed. There are few apparent indications of enclosure, or of management by coppicing. Much the same applies to names featuring the term *hangar*, meaning 'wooded slope'.

By far the most common woodland term found in place-names is *lēah* (which gives us modern names featuring the elements 'ley' and 'leigh'), which appears in the names of nearly 900 medieval townships or parishes – well over three times the number which incorporate all the other woodland terms put together. This quantity should, in theory, allow us to undertake a systematic examination of the ways in which this term was employed, but the meaning of *lēah* has in fact been understood in a particularly diverse range of ways. On the one hand, the term has traditionally been interpreted by place-name specialists in a double sense, as meaning both 'a wood' and 'a clearing in a wood'.<sup>50</sup> Landscape historians, however, have tended to prioritise the latter meaning on the not unreasonable grounds, as Rackham has pointed out, that people lived in clearings rather than woods, the same author going on to provide the definition of 'inhabited clearing'.<sup>51</sup> In contrast, Della Hooke has argued persuasively that *lēah* was mainly used for areas of relatively open wood-pasture.<sup>52</sup> Differences of interpretation in part arise from the fact that, as with *wudu* and *holt*, the meaning of *lēah* evidently changed over time. In early Saxon times it was often used for extensive regions of wooded land. *Andredeslēah*, 'the *lēah* attached to Pevensy', was thus an early name for the Weald, while the area to the north-west of Worcester was known as the *Weogorena Lēah*, the *lēah* of the *Weogora* tribe, based on Worcester.<sup>53</sup> By the time that *lēahs* were giving their names to individual settlements, however, they seem generally to have been rather smaller in area. Yet even so, they appear to have taken a variety of forms and evidence to support all the main interpretations of the term – as wood, open wood-pasture and clearing – can be found.

Some *lēahs* were clearly woods, and a few perhaps coppiced, to judge from prefixes which refer to the staves (Staveley, Lincolnshire), stakes (Pille, Northamptonshire) or rods (Yardley, Northamptonshire) they produced. Rather more appear to have been clearings, or at least had become so by the

<sup>50</sup> Smith, *Place-Name Elements*, vol. II, p. 18; Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape*, pp. 198–9.

<sup>51</sup> Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, p. 82.

<sup>52</sup> Hooke, *Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 147–8; Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 126.

<sup>53</sup> Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 125–6.



time they gave their names to settlements, for we find examples associated with flax, hay, hops, barley and beans, while at least eight had wheat growing within them, several contained tree stumps, and one was ploughed. The large number described by their prefixes as hard, stony or gravelly are likewise hard to understand unless these terms are references to the quality of the soils within or beneath them, as experienced by a cultivator. All this said, the evidence suggests that most *lēahs* probably were some kind of wood-pasture, for there are many prefixes which refer to cattle, sheep, horses, studs and goats, as well as to large wild animals like deer (at least nineteen examples) and wild boar. However, there are also signs that they were often only very thinly timbered, for although fern, a classic component of woodland-floor vegetation, is mentioned in a number of prefixes, far more common are references to classic heathland plants: indeed, most prefixes relating to vegetation, other than to trees, are to heather, broom, bracken and gorse, none of which can tolerate a significant amount of shading. If these *lēahs* were wood-pastures then they were nothing like the much-photographed Staverton in Suffolk, which – although growing on precisely the kind of acid, sandy soils which normally gives rise to heathland – features virtually no gorse, broom or heather in its understorey, for such plants cannot grow in the shade cast by the almost continuous canopy of its ancient oaks. Not all *lēahs* occupied light, acid soils, however, for some were on damp ground characterised by reeds or bog-myrtle (four examples), while others contained marshy meadows (*wisc*) and one a ‘quaking bog’. Some of these wetter *lēahs* must again have been fairly open and sparsely timbered, for they were inhabited by cranes or herons, and in one case by a bittern, all species of open wetlands. Hooke is thus doubtless correct in suggesting that the majority of *lēahs* were wood-pastures, but some appear to have been very sparsely timbered.

Perhaps the most striking feature of *lēah* names as a group is the high proportion which have as a prefix the name of an owner, occupier or user: no less than 34 per cent, compared with 17 per cent in the case of *wudu*, 18 per cent with *hyrst* and a mere 4 per cent with *holt*. Whatever *lēahs* may have been, by the time they gave their names to settlements many were closely identified with people, and in most cases with people in the singular, for there are very few which carry the names of groups – only around 7 per cent of such prefixes, for example, feature the term *ingas*.<sup>54</sup> ‘References to groups of people are rare with *lēah*’.<sup>55</sup> Some charters contain references to common *lēahs* – in 866, for example, Burgred of Mercia, granted ‘Pasture for seventy pigs in that wooded common . . . called *Wulfferdinleh*’<sup>56</sup> – and a few place-names have *gemæne*, ‘common’, as a prefix. But as Hooke has noted, ‘many, if not most, *lēah* features became associated with individuals in the early medieval period’.<sup>57</sup>

One last type of place-name needs to be briefly examined, those which

<sup>54</sup> An observation also made by Gelling and Cole: *Landscape of Place-Names*, p. 239.

<sup>55</sup> Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape*, p. 206.

<sup>56</sup> Finberg, *Early Charters of the West Midlands*, p. 105; Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, no. 513.

<sup>57</sup> Hooke, ‘Woodland Landscape of Early Medieval England’, p. 157.

incorporate the element *feld*. This term does not in fact refer to woodland at all, but to the opposite – open ground. Nevertheless, place-names which feature it are regularly used, along with those containing names like *lēah* and *wudu*, to plot the distribution of woodland in the Anglo-Saxon landscape on the not unreasonable grounds that a *feld* must imply ‘an open space in sight of woodland with which to contrast it’.<sup>58</sup> There are a large number of major place-names of this type, and for around 250 the meaning of the associated prefix is reasonably clear. Not surprisingly, only a tiny proportion (c. 4 per cent) relate to trees. In contrast, a number of *felds* are described as ‘bare’, ‘smooth’ or ‘clean’. *Felds* were even more heathy in character than *lēahs*: of the wild plants mentioned in prefixes, including all trees and shrubs, over half are species characteristic of heathland (heather, broom, furze) while a number of others are species consistent with it (bent grass, elder). Several *felds* are specifically described as ‘dry’ (such as Therfield in Hertfordshire) and there are very few references to plants of damper ground, or to ferns. It is noteworthy that *felds* have a similar proportion of prefixes referencing domestic livestock to *lēahs*, but few which refer to large wild animals, the quarry of hunters, like deer or wild boar. *Felds* were indeed open, often rather heathy land, tracts of grazing ground from which the tree cover had been largely or entirely stripped. Some *felds* were described as big or extensive, while their frequent association with rivers (6 per cent of examples, compared with none in the case of *lēah*) again suggests wide spaces, appropriately named from some prominent topographic feature.

But the most interesting aspect of *felds* concerns the way they were used, and perhaps owned. While, as we have seen, over a third of major place-names featuring the element *lēah* have as their prefix the name of an individual or a social group, in the case of *felds* the figure is only around 15 per cent. More importantly, while with *lēahs* the names of individuals massively outnumber those of groups – 93 per cent to 7 per cent – with *felds* the figures are much more even, 58 per cent and 42 per cent respectively: the group names are mainly *ingas* compounds, ‘the people of’, but also include terms like ‘the Mercians’ and ‘the Anglians’. Given that many *lēahs* and *felds* occur in the same broad geographical contexts, especially in areas of poorly draining clay, there is an implication here that the survival of tree cover was to some extent connected with patterns of exploitation. *Lēahs* maintained a measure of tree cover because they were used by individuals or families. *Felds* were areas which, more widely shared, had become open ground.

### *Explaining woodland distributions*

The evidence of place-names, and of charters, thus suggests that Anglo-Saxon England was not characterised by dense, impenetrable and extensive areas of woodland. Indeed, even in early Saxon times there were large tracts of

<sup>58</sup> Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, p. 82.

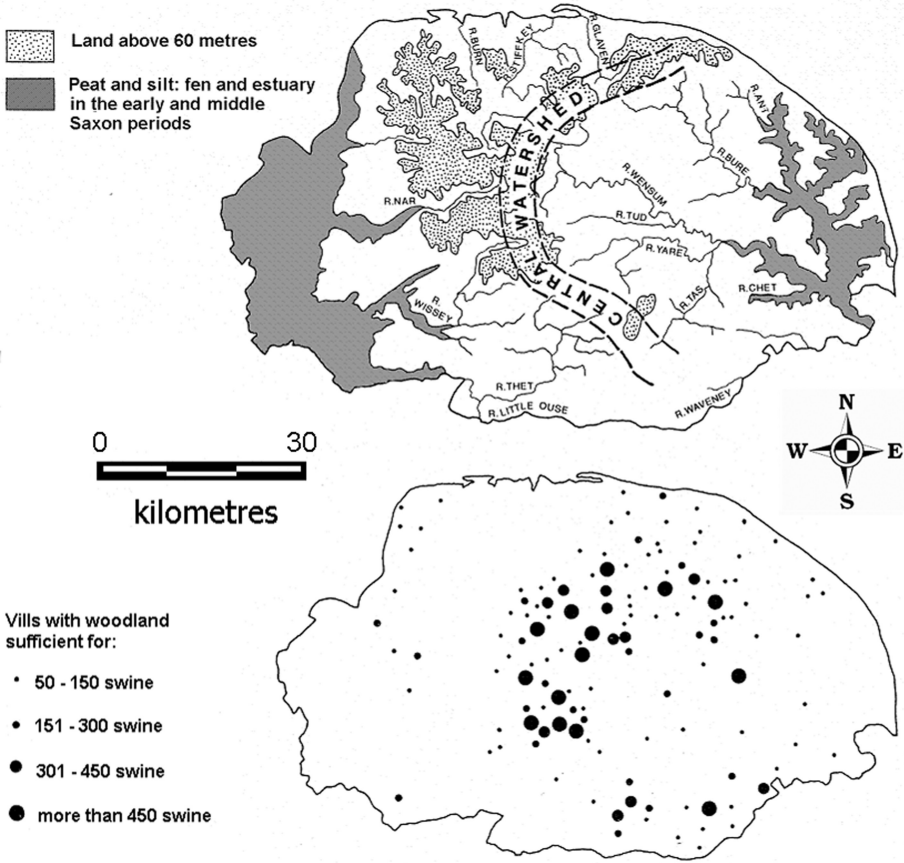
countryside which were only very thinly timbered or completely lacking in tree cover, either because they had been cleared in remote prehistory and subsequently kept open by continuous grazing, or perhaps because they had never really been wooded. Woodland took many forms, and was used and exploited in a variety of ways, and with varying degrees of intensity. Most, however, probably comprised fairly open wood-pasture, much of which degenerated to heath, downland or some other form of open grazing by the high Middle Ages. Its survival, and its distribution at a local or regional level, was probably structured by a complex range of forces

Firstly, woodland tended to survive better in locations remote from the main areas of settlement, and thus on high interfluvies and around watersheds – on wolds rather than in major river valleys – especially where these were occupied by intractable soils, and covered wide areas between valleys. In the county of Norfolk, for example, the larger areas of woodland recorded by Domesday are concentrated in what Rackham has described as a ‘wooded crescent’, running from the north-east of the county, through the centre, and down to the south-east. This band of wooded ground does not correspond, in any very simple or direct manner, with the heaviest soils in the county, for these are strongly concentrated in the south. Instead, it roughly follows the line of the principal watershed in Norfolk, between rivers draining into the Wash or with outfalls on the north coast of the county, and those which drain eastwards, mainly into the North Sea via Great Yarmouth (Figure 37).

But it is in the Midlands in particular that we can see most clearly the association between the principal tracts of late Saxon woodland and major watersheds. There was, as we have seen, much unploughed ground in these champion landscapes, especially on the Lias clays, forming ribbons and bands running through the furlongs (Figure 24). But with a high edge/area ratio, any woodland which these areas had once carried was particularly susceptible to felling and grazing, working from the outside inwards, and by the thirteenth century – and probably for long before – they mostly comprised quite open ground. Instead, it was on the high, clay-covered interfluvies remote from valley-floor settlements that large and continuous blocks of unploughed ground, and thus woodland, generally survived best. Some, such as *Bromsgrove* (between the Nene and the Ouse), had it is true largely disappeared by the time of the Norman Conquest, but many remained and were then given additional legal protection as royal forests, such as the forests of Rockingham (between the Nene and the Welland); Whittlewood (between the Nene and the Ouse) and Bernwood (between the Great Ouse, Ray, Ouzel, Thame and their tributaries).<sup>59</sup> It was in these locations that, by the high Middle Ages, the majority of enclosed woodland, deer parks, and wooded commons were to be found in Midland districts.

In ‘woodland’ regions, in contrast, this neat association of woods and watersheds often appears to have become complicated by patterns of exploitation which were themselves engendered by topographic factors.

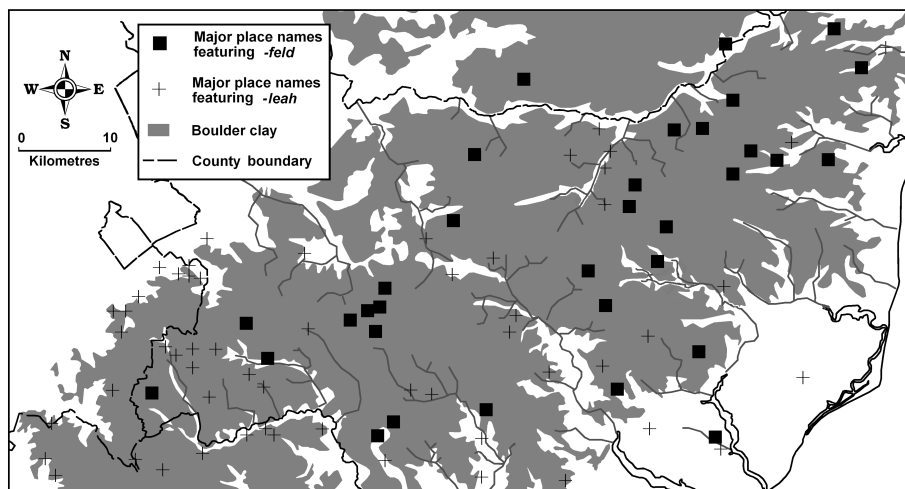
<sup>59</sup> M. Reed, *The Buckinghamshire Landscape* (London, 1979), pp. 74–5.



**Figure 37.** Above: the watershed running through the centre of Norfolk, separating rivers draining eastwards, entering the sea at Great Yarmouth, from those flowing north and west. Below: the larger areas of woodland in the county of Norfolk recorded in Domesday Book.

The distinction between *felds* and *lēahs* noted above had in some areas a topographic dimension. Place-names containing the element *feld* are more common on the boulder clays of Suffolk and Essex than in any other part of the country: nearly a fifth of the national total are to be found here. There are also numerous examples of names containing the element *lēah*. But their distributions are subtly but decidedly different. *Felds* tend to be found towards the centres of broad, level clay uplands. *Lēahs*, in contrast, tend to cluster towards their margins. In consequence, the more continuous and uninterrupted the clay plateau, the more common are names featuring the element *feld*; the more dissected, the greater the number of names in *lēah*. The pattern is especially clear in Suffolk and in consequence, in Edward Martin's words, 'names ending in *-field* are more numerous in north-east Suffolk where they

occur on the extensive flat interfluves; by contrast –*ley* names are commoner in south-west Suffolk, where the more dissected topography has given rise to smaller and narrower interfluves’ (Figure 38).<sup>60</sup>



**Figure 38.** The distributions of place-names featuring the elements *lēah* and *feld* in Suffolk and parts of the adjoining counties. *Lēah* names tend to be more common on the margins of the boulder-clay plateau and are thus most frequent where this is most dissected. *Feld*, in contrast, is associated with wide, level areas of the plateau.

There are thus clear hints that, by later Saxon times, the upland wolds in some districts may have developed a doughnut-like configuration, with more open ground lying towards their centre and more wooded ground towards their margins. Such an arrangement is mirrored, in a slightly different and later context, by the way that in many areas of ‘ancient countryside’ medieval commons tended to occupy the central sections of clay plateau while enclosed woods clustered towards their edges, a relationship noted by, amongst others, Peter Warner.<sup>61</sup> In a similar manner, Witney has observed how, by late-medieval times, most woodland within the Weald of Kent and Sussex survived towards its outer edges rather than, as we might expect, towards its centre.<sup>62</sup> Where – as is often the case – the topography of an area is complex and the configuration of clay uplands irregular, the pattern only slowly becomes apparent, as in the area of north-east Hertfordshire shown in Figure 39: but it is usually there. What is particularly striking in this particular case is that fields appearing on post-medieval maps bearing names associated with medieval woodland clearance – ‘Stocking’, ‘Reading’ and the rest – display a close spatial association with the areas of medieval

<sup>60</sup> E. Martin, ‘Place-Name Patterns’, in D. Dymond and E. Martin (eds.), *An Historical Atlas of Suffolk*, revised edn (Ipswich, 1999), pp. 50–1.

<sup>61</sup> Warner, *Greens, Commons and Clayland Colonisation*, pp. 5–9.

<sup>62</sup> Witney, ‘Woodland Economy of Kent’.



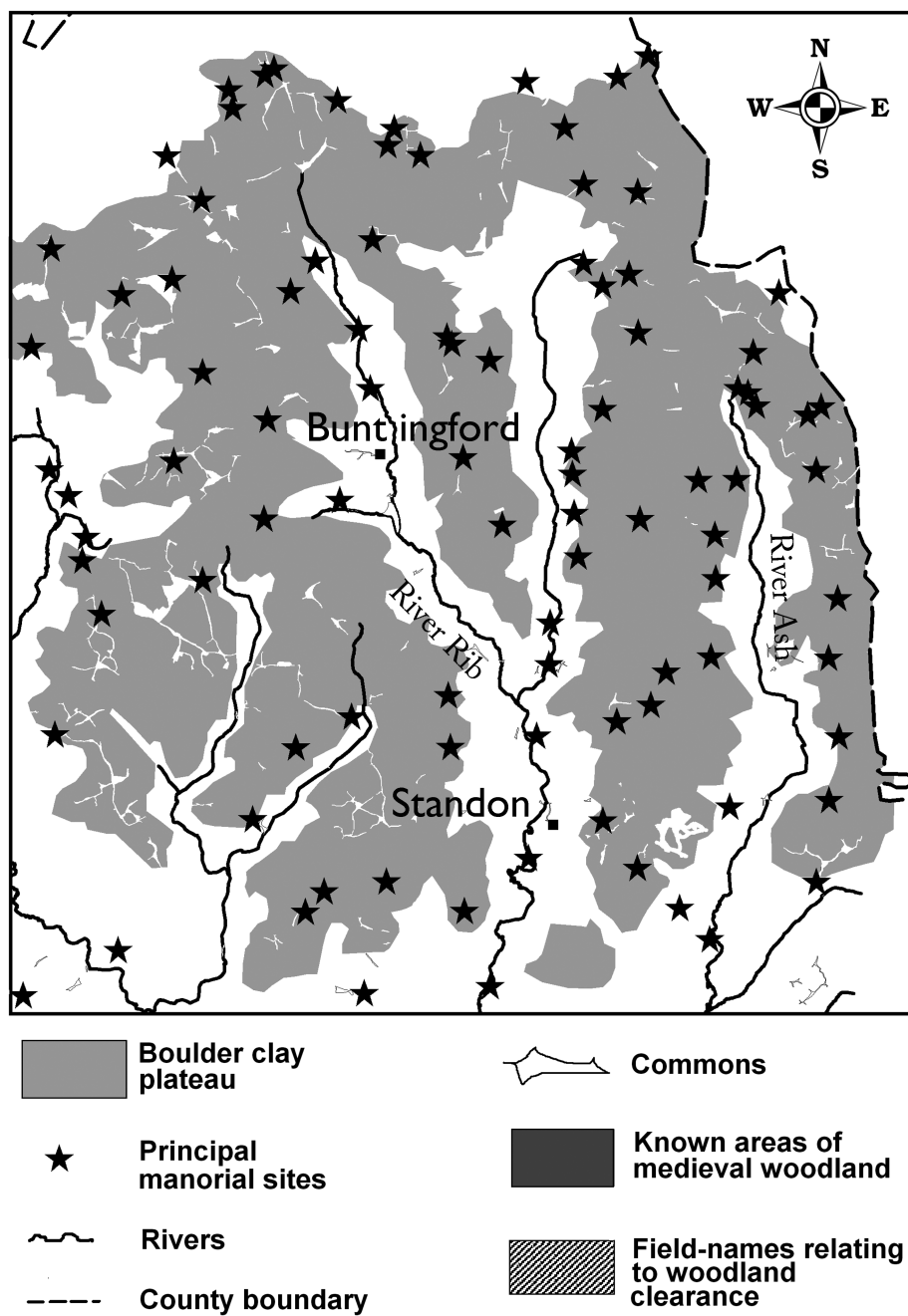
woodland, but virtually none with greens and commons. The distinction between the open cores and wooded peripheries of the clay uplands was thus evidently an ancient one, and deliberate clearance of woodland was perhaps largely restricted to the latter (Figure 39b). In the centres of these upland tracts tree cover may have already been largely destroyed by over-grazing and indiscriminate felling before the *felds* were broken up, settled and cultivated in the course of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

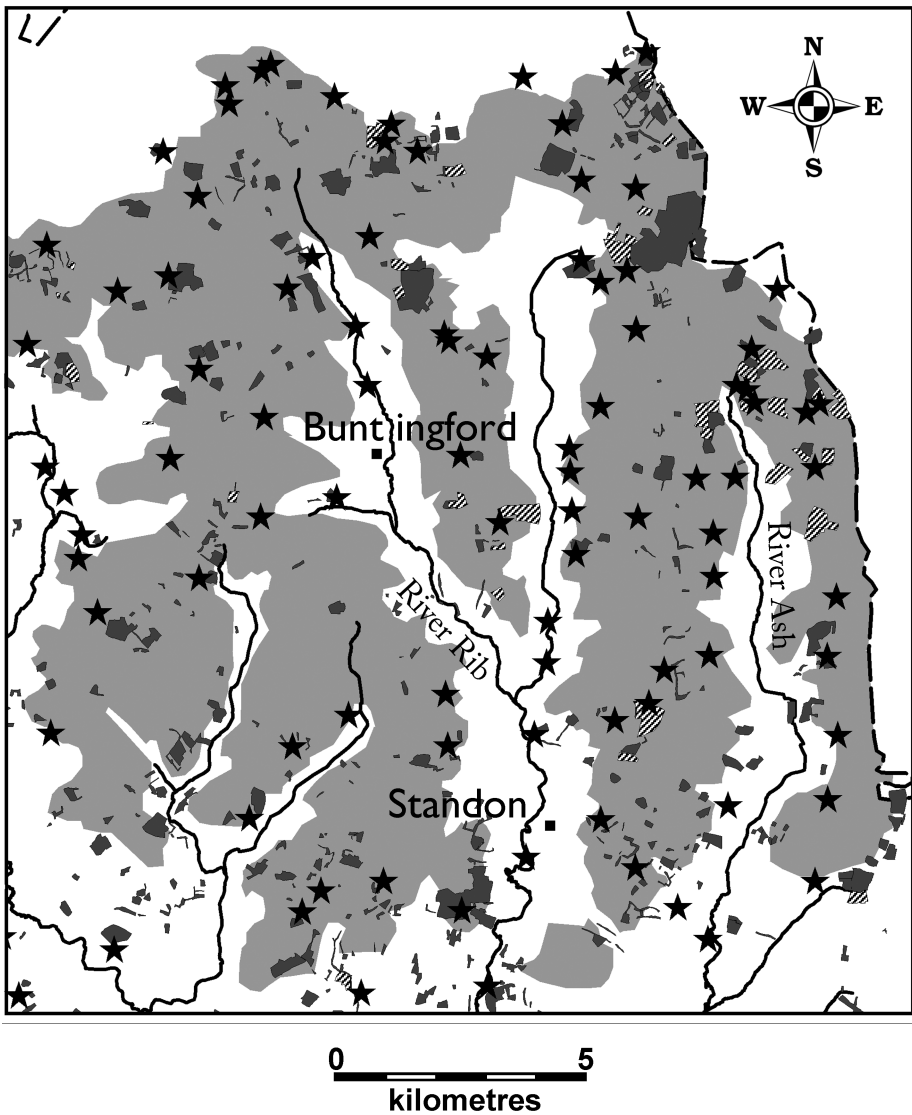
Witney explained the pattern in the Weald largely in terms of access. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw a steady decline in the economic importance of woods as swine pastures and grazing grounds and a concomitant increase in the demand for, and thus in the value of, wood and timber. Areas of woodland were enclosed and more intensively managed in places where their products could be transported to markets with relative ease. In the 'central core of the Weald' in contrast, 'heavy loads were almost undisposible' because of the difficulties involved in moving laden carts in winter time along difficult clay roads.<sup>63</sup> Colonisation was thus directed into the more remote districts, where the swine-woods were progressively felled and turned to farmland, or else degenerated to open commons.

These are convincing arguments. But there is some evidence that another factor contributed to the development of these kinds of doughnut-like patterns – systems of ownership and exploitation. The Saxon *felds*, relatively open ground, often appear from their prefixes to have been exploited by large numbers of people, and this may have been because they lay towards the centre of wooded zones and thus equidistant from a large number of settlements scattered around their margins. The more peripheral parts of the wolds, in contrast, were located closer to particular settlements, whose inhabitants were able to control their exploitation: hence the higher proportion of *lēah* names bearing individual personal names as a prefix. Subsequently, many of these settlements developed into manors, and lordly rights were asserted to more effectively control these wooded areas. Some sections were then grubbed out to create submanors or ring-fence farms – hence the concentrations of fields bearing 'clearance' names in these locations – but many were enclosed, preserved and managed more intensively as coppiced woods. The latter, as already noted, were almost invariably part of the manorial demesne and frequently carried the names of particular manors, or those of their owners ('Monks Wood'), or else some simple indication of appropriation such as 'Hall Wood'. In many cases the spatial association of woodland and manor was so close that they lay next to each other: in some places, as for example at Hedenham or Gawdy in south Norfolk, the hall site was abandoned in the late Middle Ages, so that the woodland expanded across it, preserving its earthwork traces. As peripheral areas of the wolds were thus preserved and enclosed, the more open central areas fragmented into splintered parcels, which came to be surrounded by farms and cottages – the commons and greens so characteristic of these landscapes – interspersed with farmland.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 20.







**Figure 39.** Woods, commons, ‘clearance’ field names and the principal medieval manorial sites in north-east Hertfordshire. Commons (which as mapped include obvious encroachments) tend to occur towards the centres of the boulder-clay plateaux, and away from manorial sites. Woods, together with field names bearing names indicative of woodland clearance (‘Reading’, ‘Stocking’ and the like) are more likely to be found towards the plateaux margins, and close to manorial sites.

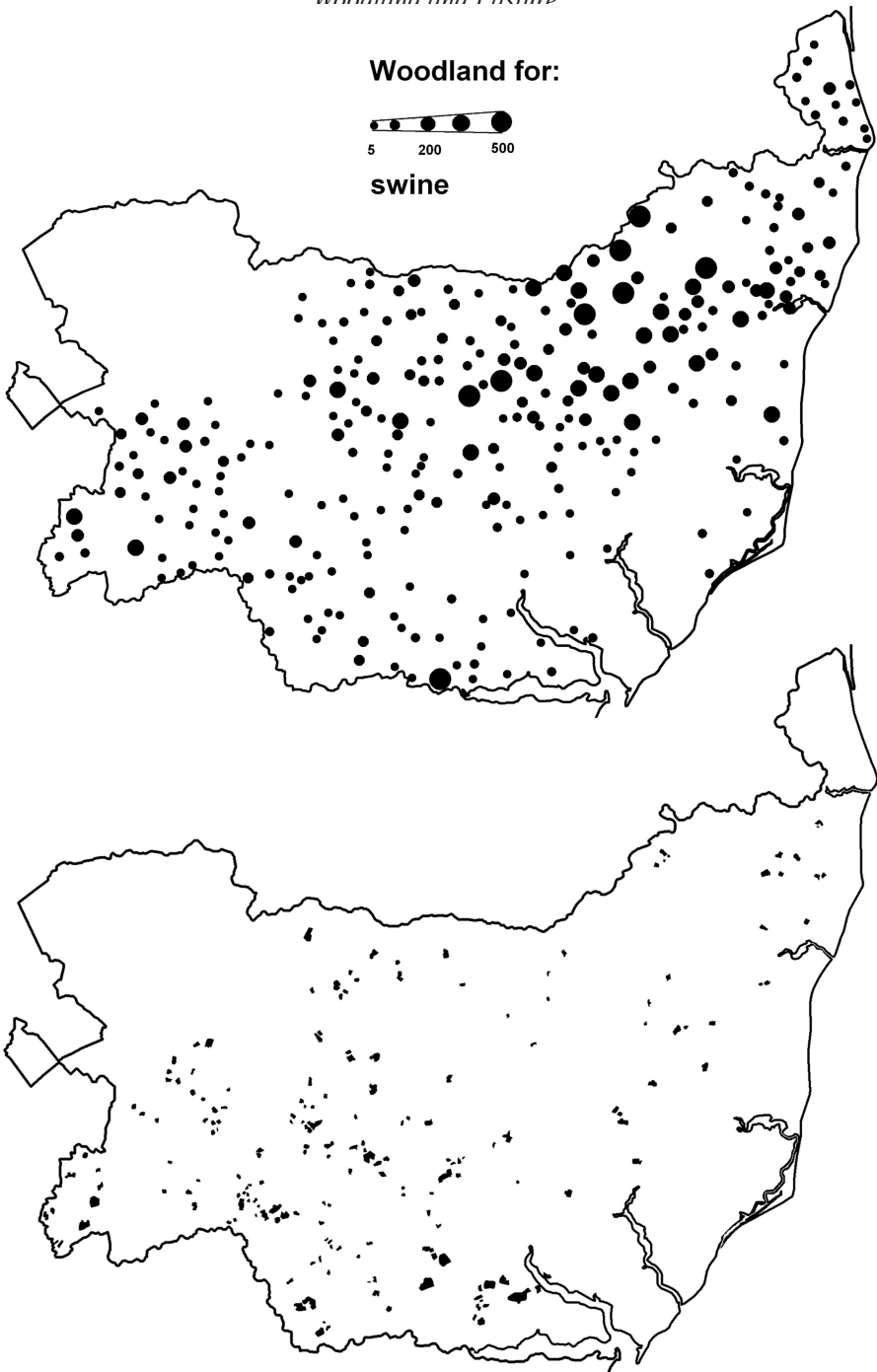
As Patsy Dallas has shown, however, these sometimes retained a measure of tree cover into post-medieval times, but usually towards their margins, where local custom often allowed tenants to protect trees planted 'by their gates':<sup>64</sup> replicating once again, yet now in miniature, the by now familiar doughnut pattern.

The relative proportions of different types of woodland changed over time, and especially in the period of rapid population growth through the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries. As the number of enclosed and coppiced woods increased, wood-pastures degenerated, or were grubbed out to make way for agriculture. It is this, of course, which explains the remarkable differences that we find in many counties between the distribution of Domesday woodland and that exhibited by surviving medieval woods. In Suffolk, for example, Domesday shows that the largest areas of wood-pasture were to be found on the broad, level plateaux in the north-east of the county. Their central areas by this stage presumably contained, to judge from the place-name evidence, some open *felds* but the sheer extent of level, poorly drained land ensured that the woodlands surrounding these remained extensive. In contrast, surviving areas of ancient, semi-natural woodland are mainly found in the south-west of the county, where the plateau is dissected and fragmented by the valleys of streams and rivers (Figure 40). Hodkinson's map of Suffolk, published in 1783, shows the same pattern, and also reveals that the majority of the larger commons were to be found in the north-east, usually towards the centres of interfluves. A similar if less marked development can be discerned in Hertfordshire. Here the greatest areas of Domesday woodland were to be found in the south and west of the county, on the dipslope of the Chiltern Hills and along the high watershed on the county's boundary with Middlesex – both districts in which wide interfluves were characterised by acidic, relatively infertile clays. By the time the earliest maps were made, including Drury's and Andrews's county survey of 1766, the concentration of woodland here was much less marked. Instead it was in the centre and east of the county, where the topography is much more dissected by the streams and rivers cutting through the upland clays, that the majority of enclosed coppiced woodland was to be found.

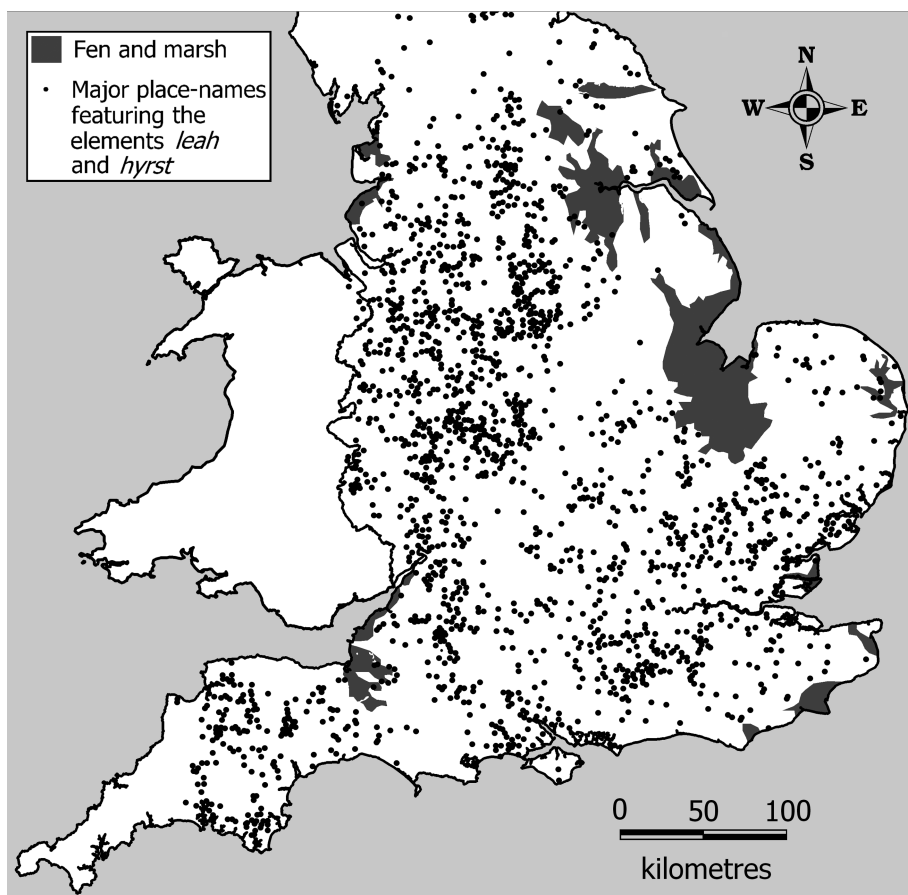
### *'Woodland' and champion revisited*

The distribution of woodland in eleventh-, twelfth- and thirteenth-century England was evidently the outcome of many complex influences. In part, the distinction between well-wooded and poorly wooded areas was inherited from the prehistoric and Roman periods. But in large measure it probably developed during the Saxon period through a complex interplay of social, topographic, environmental and demographic factors. The extent of woodland in any area at any period was not a simple or reliable indicator of the

<sup>64</sup> Dallas, 'Sustainable Environments', pp. 26–30.



**Figure 40.** The distribution of Domesday woodland in Suffolk (above) and areas of ancient, semi-natural woodland surviving today or known from documentary sources (below).



**Figure 41.** The distribution in England of major place-names featuring the elements *leah* and *hyrst* (after O. Rackham, *Ancient Woodland*).

extent of unploughed ground, for the latter took many other forms: and Domesday shows clearly that woodland could be rare in sparsely populated districts, like the East Anglian Breckland, and abundant in densely settled ones, such as north Essex.

It is with these observations in mind that we need to consider again the suggestions made by Roberts and Wrathmell, and by Oliver Rackham, that the distribution of place-names and of Domesday woodland indicates that the champion areas of England had been largely cleared of woodland by the end of the Roman period, and that they thus represent core areas of early settlement, in which arable farming was most extensive and which in consequence eventually experienced a revolution in the landscape which brought open fields and nucleated villages into existence. The first point to note is that the relationship between the place-name patterns and the distribution of Domesday woodland on the one hand and of the Central

Province on the other is not quite as close as has sometimes been suggested, and is exaggerated in some publications by a tendency to impose on the distributions exhibited by the former the outline of the latter: when the distribution of woodland place-names is presented alone the relationship with landscape regions is perhaps not quite so striking (compare Figures 19 and 41). But more important is the fact that there is no real evidence that the distribution of woodland place-names reflects the character of the environment at the start of the Anglo-Saxon period. Most of these names were probably coined in the period after the eighth century, many not until the ninth, tenth or even eleventh, and they thus tell us more about how the distribution of wooded and open ground developed in the course of the Saxon period.<sup>65</sup> Insofar as a relationship between the distribution of early woodland and the character of medieval landscape regions does exist this is unlikely (given the arguments set out in the course of this chapter) to have been as simple and as direct as the one suggested by Rackham, Roberts and Wrathmell. In other words, rather than seeing the emergence of nucleated settlements as a consequence of a paucity of woodland, it probably makes more sense to reverse the causality. As we have seen, where settlement was scattered in later Saxon times some parts of the wooded wastes seem to have developed into private *lēahs*, parts of which in turn became enclosed woodland. In contrast, where more clustered patterns of Saxon farms emerged and holdings became increasingly intermixed, areas of wood-pasture were exploited in common by large and growing groups of farmers and woodland was therefore less likely to survive, except on high clay-covered interfluves, where the sheer extent of continuous unploughed ground and remoteness from valley-floor settlements ensured trees a measure of protection, subsequently augmented in many cases by the imposition of forest law. In contrast, the narrower bands and ribbons of unploughed ground running through such communal landscapes had generally been denuded of trees by the high Middle Ages. Regional variations in the density of woodland were not, therefore, related in any simple way to population pressure or the extent of arable land use. They were structured by the interplay of a range of social and environmental factors, and the former were themselves in part a function of the latter. The survival or destruction of woodland was thus the consequence of processes that we may never be able to fully reconstruct or understand, but whose complexity we must never underestimate.

<sup>65</sup> Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of Place-Names*, p. 237.



## Conclusion

### Time and Topography

Throughout the course of this book I have argued that patterns of regional variation in early-medieval England were largely a function of environmental factors: of climate, topography, geology and soils. Although this is an unfashionable suggestion, the hidden hand of nature does appear to be implicated in many of the distributions studied by landscape historians, historical geographers, archaeologists and others; and by examining particular social and cultural patterns within their environmental contexts we can often, as I have suggested, contribute significantly to an understanding of their true significance.

I have thus argued that spatial variations in the character of the Anglo-Saxon settlement, as indicated by the distribution of different kinds of artefacts and burial practices in the fifth and sixth centuries, were associated with broad topographic zones, corresponding to major drainage basins and defined by the watersheds between them. This, I further suggested, implies that whatever the precise scale of immigration from the continental mainland in this period the cultural character of different regions of early England was forged largely by emulation, as local communities assumed fashions and identities to which they were most regularly exposed. The patterns exhibited by material culture, that is, do not simply mirror the historical events imperfectly presented in our documentary sources: they do not result from either the random patterns of conquest effected by a military elite, or the chance choices of territories within which to settle made by those involved in a folk movement. Similar topographic factors appear to have structured the distribution of Scandinavian influence in the ninth century, again with implications for the ways in which we should understand the character of the Danish incursions. I have also argued that, as a network of local manors replaced systems of extensive lordships, based on royal villas, in the course of the later Saxon period, through a process of social differentiation amongst the population as a whole as much as through the progressive fission of extensive 'estates' owned by a permanent elite, climatic variations ensured the emergence of important social and tenurial differences between the south and west of England, and the east. In the latter, rapid population growth and more reliable harvests served to retard the development of manorialism. East Anglia and the east Midlands were thus characterised by the time of the Domesday Book by populations which included larger numbers of free peasants and by more complex forms of manorial organisation than districts lying to the south and west.

These environmentally engendered variations in social organisation, cultural identity and the intensity of foreign settlement and influence, interesting and important though they are, do not appear to have been key factors in the development of regional variations in the landscapes of medieval England. The latter were instead largely the consequence of rather different kinds of environmental influence, albeit compounded to some extent by the spatial variations in population density and in social and tenurial structures just noted. Broad social and economic developments, as tribal societies developed into petty kingdoms and the latter into a national and finally a feudal state, were thus refracted both directly and indirectly through the complex kaleidoscope created by local and regional variations in geology, soils, climate and topography.

I suggested in Chapter 4 that the extensive modes of exploitation characteristic of the earlier Saxon period, in which arable cultivation was mainly limited to the lighter soils and large tracts of ground were devoted to pasture and woodland, took spatial forms which were closely related to local and regional topographies. Often, following the models advanced by Alan Everitt and Charles Phythian Adams, such 'large terrains' (to use Andrew Fleming's term) seem to have been neatly nested within river valleys and drainage basins.<sup>1</sup> These extensive patterns of exploitation have left numerous traces within the modern landscape, in terms of co-axial fields, resource-linkage routes and the like, the significance of which has sometimes been misunderstood in the past, with the former in particular having been interpreted as the consequence of prehistoric 'planning'.<sup>2</sup> Only when explored within the frameworks of topography does the true significance of these features become apparent, a good example of the dangers of examining the structures of landscape entirely in social terms and divorced from the natural environment.

Within these extensive territories settlement was relatively mobile in the early Saxon period but, perhaps because of improvements in ploughing technology and a growing population, it stabilised in the course of the seventh and eighth centuries. The varied landscapes of medieval England had their roots in this initial period of stabilisation, but mainly emerged in the course of the later Saxon and early post-Conquest periods. Perhaps the most radical argument presented in this book is that the widely accepted model of village nucleation in middle or later Saxon times does not represent the most useful way of thinking about settlement change in these periods. As settlements stopped drifting around the landscape, two, three or sometimes more came to stand in reasonable proximity, often close to a reliable supply of water. But 'villages', as this term is usually understood, did not normally appear in this period (with the exceptions noted in Chapter 1) and in most districts, especially the more agriculturally marginal, widely scattered individual homesteads remained the normal form of settlement.

<sup>1</sup> A. Fleming, 'Prehistoric Landscapes and the Quest for Territorial Pattern', in Everson and Williamson (eds.), *The Archaeology of Landscape*, pp. 42–66.

<sup>2</sup> By myself in particular; Williamson, 'Early Coaxial Field Systems'.

Villages mainly developed subsequently, through the gradual expansion of these initial nuclei. They did not come into existence at a stroke through the concentration of large numbers of scattered farms into nucleated settlements, as landscape historians and archaeologists usually argue.

The initial pre-village nuclei themselves clearly varied in size and character. Some larger settlement clusters presumably represent royal *tuns* or associated bond settlements but the majority of middle Saxon sites must have been the homesteads of free peasants, *ceorls*. The fact that many of these eventually developed, as at Raunds, directly into late Saxon manorial sites provides some support for the idea – presented in Chapters 1 and 5 – that manorialism emerged as much from below as from above. The new farms which were added over time to these initial settlement cores may have been the dwellings of kinsmen, the growth in the size of the settlement perhaps reflecting not only demographic expansion but also a shift from joint family landholding to more individualised forms of tenure. But many were held as service-tenancies by those disadvantaged by population growth and accelerating social differentiation, and who were thus obliged to accept holdings from more fortunate neighbours. This is not, of course, to deny that similar patterns of service-tenancy may on occasions have been enforced wholesale on the inhabitants of outlying *warland* when royal *tuns* passed to new owners, or that bond settlements on ancient royal demesne often developed into villages. But the likelihood that many villages were associated with manors which had developed from the homesteads of free *ceorls* has almost certainly been underestimated in the past.

Population growth was thus indirectly, as well as directly, implicated in village development. It was also of necessity associated with the expansion of cultivation onto both heavier soils and less fertile ones – something which, in many if not most areas of lowland England, involved the spread of arable out of major valleys and onto interfluvies. There were, however, important variations in the nature of this process, variations which contributed in a number of ways to the distinctive character of both local and regional landscapes. In particular, significant differences emerged in the relative extent and disposition of ploughed and unploughed ground. On light, easily leached land extensive uncultivated areas often survived into the Middle Ages. This was partly because the arable required regular folding to maintain fertility, so that the downs and heaths functioned, in effect, as nutrient reservoirs, whose extent could not be safely reduced beyond a certain point. Such uncultivated land normally lay in large, continuous blocks: so too did the cultivated, for there was little reason to leave pockets of pasture within the arable fields. On heavier land, in contrast, the extent and configuration of unploughed ground was more varied, and often more complex, the consequence of both the intrinsic character and the spatial configuration of particular types of soil. In some areas, soils either displayed little variation, and were all of equal quality and tractability, or else the more difficult ground was concentrated in distinct blocks. In either circumstance ploughland again tended to expand on a broad front, with unploughed ground forming large and continuous

tracts, usually located towards major interfluves. In some parts of the country particularly extensive and continuous areas of tenacious, poorly draining stagnogleys existed in such locations, which remained relatively poorly settled in the early Middle Ages. But in many clayland districts soils of different quality and characteristics were intermingled and interdigitated in a complex and intricate manner. As cultivation expanded in such circumstances numerous narrow ribbons and bands of unploughed land thus survived within the arable, leap-frogged as farmers brought the more inviting land into cultivation first.

The varied morphologies of medieval villages arose both from the differing numbers of middle Saxon nuclei from which they developed and from these kinds of variation in the configuration of arable and pasture. In areas where cultivation had expanded on a broad front and the arable formed a continuous band around a settlement at each stage of its development, successive tofts and crofts were often laid out across cultivated and divided land and in consequence their morphology was structured by the patterns of pre-existing open-field strips or other parcels of land suitably shaped for ploughing. It was this process, rather than the dictates of lords or magnates, which appears to have been responsible for the majority of the regular rows which are such a notable feature of village plans in many parts of the country. More usually, pockets of unploughed ground survived close to a settlement, into which farms could conveniently spread, often initially around their margins and thus leaving a central area of open pasture. As population rose, such central greens and commons usually fragmented, as additional farms and cottages were established within them, in most cases either disappearing altogether, or leaving only a number of tiny open spaces, linked by curving lanes and roads.

Whether they expanded over arable, or around and eventually into areas of pasture – and many village plans exhibit signs of both kinds of development – the effective growth of settlements *in situ* demonstrates a reluctance or inability to establish new farms at a distance from existing dwellings. In some areas of the country all the new farms which were established in the course of the late Saxon and post-Conquest periods were added to the existing settlement areas in this manner, producing a pattern of strongly nucleated villages without outlying farms or hamlets. But elsewhere, to varying degrees, they dispersed across the landscape, usually once again hugging the remnants of the common pastures, which were progressively fragmented by the expansion of cultivation. In the development of both nucleated and dispersed patterns of settlement we thus see the same desire to place crofts on the margins of common pastures, clearly reflecting the convenience such a location provided to the small, individualised farms which constituted the later additions to the initial middle Saxon settlement nuclei.

The extent to which settlement gradually developed in a nucleated or dispersed manner in any district was in large measure a function of hydrology. Farms tended to remain clustered not simply in circumstances where there was only a single available source of water, but also where one source was

clearly superior in character or reliability to any alternatives which might be available in a locality. Yet other influences were also clearly important. As I argued in Chapter 8, farms tended to remain in close proximity to each other where there was a need to organise labour and equipment rapidly for the management of extensive hay meadows or to share ploughteams on problematic clay soils, or where communal folding flocks were essential for the successful cultivation of light, leached land. All these incentives to village living, hydrological and agrarian, were for geological and topographic reasons particularly strong in the scarp-and-vale countryside of the Midlands and on the chalklands of southern and eastern England, and it was here that various forms of champion landscape with their strongly nucleated patterns of settlement had developed by the twelfth century. Elsewhere, while nucleated villages often emerged, the landscape came to be dominated by various forms of dispersed settlement – isolated farms and hamlets. But, as I have emphasised, there were many variations in the relative extent of nucleation and dispersal, at both a local and regional level, and the identification of homogeneous and continuous settlement and landscape regions or provinces, and in particular the neat division of lowland England into ‘woodland’ and champion, is in many ways misleading.

Where farms clustered closely together the equitable subdivision of properties through inheritance, the allocation of land in the form of service tenancies or the division of reclaimed land all tended to create over time large areas of intermixed arable. This in itself would have drawn farmers more and more into forms of communal agriculture. But the development of regular open fields was also directly encouraged, in the ways described in Chapter 8, by the sharing of ploughs and the organisation of folding, and by the creation of continuous fallowing sectors – the most efficient way of organising communal grazing on the arable. These things all led, in turn, to the more even dispersal of properties across the fields, sometimes perhaps effected gradually through sale and exchange, sometimes more rapidly by wholesale reorganisation. It seems likely, however, that additional factors – the need to equalise the quality of land within increasingly close-knit communities where dues and burdens were tied to the size of holdings – may have contributed to the particularly regular arrangements of holdings found in many Midland villages, arrangements which appear on the present evidence to have been created at a relatively late date, mainly in the eleventh or twelfth centuries.

As I have emphasised, open fields were also an important feature of the landscape in most areas of dispersed settlement. They displayed much local and regional variation in terms of their extent relative to enclosed land and in the manner in which they were organised and cultivated. One key differentiating factor was probably the scale of demographic expansion which occurred in different districts between the middle Saxon period, when settlement stabilised, and the time of the Norman Conquest, when property structures tended to fossilise, with the enforcement of primogeniture amongst principal landowners and the effective end at manorial level of a free market in land. At one extreme, as in parts of East Anglia, a phenomenal growth in

population occurred from what was often a low initial base. Family holdings thus disintegrated into a plethora of small intermixed manors and free tenancies. A teeming population cultivated tiny holdings, but often on land of extraordinary fertility under climatic conditions well suited to cereal production. Chaotic open fields came to occupy much of the landscape, and commons surrounded by disorganised girdles of dwellings accounted for much of the rest. In many cases, the particular need for small farms to stand at the junction of pasture and arable ensured the wholesale migration of farmsteads to new locations, away from the old middle/late Saxon sites, especially where the scale of arable expansion ensured that the latter came to occupy positions marginal to the main areas of cultivation. As a result, churches – which were often established at an early date in this populous and socially competitive region – came to stand in many cases isolated from or on the edges of the main areas of medieval settlement. With no need to intensively fold or even regularly fallow the land almost no communal regulations were exercised over the open fields, other than that of grazing on the aftermath of the harvest. In environments peculiarly suited to the cultivation of arable crops, farmers had little need to band together in an organised manner to face the challenges posed by a hostile environment.

More usually, in districts in which late Saxon demographic expansion was more muted, ancient family holdings fragmented less and thus developed into a multiplicity of manors or, more occasionally, diminutive villas, a situation which was then fossilised by the tenurial changes brought by the Norman Conquest. The arable consequently expanded from a multiplicity of small and quite separate settlements, so that properties became intermingled to a more limited extent than in areas of nucleated settlement, while the other factors already noted as encouraging the creation of extensive communal field systems were either absent or of little importance. The kinds of regular open fields found in Midland areas, with the properties of large numbers of farmers intermingled over extensive areas, thus failed to develop, although common rotations and folding arrangements were frequently adopted, especially on lighter land. The areas of intermixed arable often included some demesne land but, in these districts of less dramatic late Saxon growth, ancient holdings suffered less extreme subdivision and much demesne therefore existed in severalty, or was reclaimed in severalty from the adjacent areas of waste in the post-Conquest period. This pattern of development explains such things as the distinction between the block demesnes of Essex or Hertfordshire and the complete intermixture of demesne and peasant land found in the fields of East Anglia *sensu stricto*, highlighted by researchers like Martin and Satchell.<sup>3</sup> Manors in such districts thus often stood in the midst of their own fields, and where their owners created submanors or larger freehold farms on the waste in the course of the later eleventh and early twelfth century these, too, were often establishments of sufficient size to sit centrally within ring-fence properties. In these contexts, common-edge settlement tended to be a feature of twelfth

<sup>3</sup> Martin and Satchell, *Where Most Enclosures Be*, pp. 40–5.



and thirteenth-century expansion, as the principal manors allowed the more distant areas of waste to be broken up and colonised by smaller farms. In such circumstances migration away from church sites also sometimes occurred, but only where the expansion of cultivation took place in such a manner that old sites came to be located asymmetrically within a territory, and at too great a distance from what were now the main areas of farmland.

There were many other variations on these basic themes. Some woodland areas, for example, lay in districts which for reasons of climate and soils carried low population densities and large tracts of woodland at the time of Domesday, so that expansion occurred from a small number of manorial nuclei and was associated with the proliferation of assarts granted as free tenancies – in the sense that the tenants paid money rent, rather than services – and the development of complex mixtures of enclosed crofts and irregular open fields. Elsewhere, in districts in which environmental conditions ensured more limited post-Conquest expansion, large areas of unploughed common land remained throughout the Middle Ages, and more land was held in severalty.

The extent to which woodland survived in any district – whether in the sense of the wood-pastures which predominated in later Saxon England or the smaller, enclosed and intensively managed coppiced woods which burgeoned in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – also displayed much variation. Population pressure and the extent to which the cultivated area was expanded was an influence on this but arguably a less significant one than is sometimes suggested. Many of the most densely settled districts of England retained considerable areas of woodland throughout the Middle Ages, while conversely some of the most sparsely settled, such as the Breckland of East Anglia, had very little. Woodland was only one alternative to arable, and was always in danger of degenerating to heath or other forms of pasture through over-exploitation. The extent to which it survived was thus related to systems of authority and management as much as to the scale of demographic pressure.

Where villages became the principal form of settlement and arable land became increasingly intermingled as cultivation expanded emerging communities evidently regarded the surrounding unploughed land as common to all. Shared between large numbers of people, it was difficult in the long term to manage exploitation and preserve tree cover, and hard to enclose portions for use as coppice, for these were landscapes in which any enclosed land, occupied in severalty, was relatively unusual. In such districts, the survival of woodland into the thirteenth century was closely related to the configuration of unploughed ground. Where this developed in the form of small parcels or narrow ribbons in the manner described earlier it was more susceptible to pressures from its margins through grazing and extraction, and thus tended to degenerate to open ground at an early date. Conversely, woodland survived best where unploughed land comprised larger blocks, in most cases located on high watersheds and thus at a distance from the main centres of population. Many such areas eventually became royal forests (see above, pp. 224).

Where settlements and manors developed in a more dispersed form, it appears that particular areas of woodland often came to be associated with particular individuals and families, thus encouraging their survival. Wood-pastures may have had particular value in some of these areas because, as I noted in Chapter 7, they were also often ones in which meadows were in short supply, and the exploitation of woodlands for winter grazing or leafy hay may to some extent have made up for the deficiency. This may, in part, explain why there was no very direct association between population density and the extent of woodland at the time of Domesday. The most extensive tracts of woodland were, as in champion districts, often found on interfluvies characterised by infertile or poorly draining soils. But there are signs that these wooded tracts often developed a doughnut form, with tree cover surviving better towards their margins, where areas were exploited by individual Saxon households as *lēahs*, than it did towards their centres, where use by wider groups of people tended to ensure degeneration to open *felds*. As households of free peasants evolved, as they often appear to have done, into early manors, private *lēahs* were converted in part into assarts of enclosed land, but in part into enclosed wood-pastures or coppiced woods.

Once again, there were many variations on these basic themes. Where, for example, woodland had been extensive at the time of Domesday and population levels low, expansion from a small number of early manorial nuclei was often achieved by the granting of assarts as free tenancies, as in the case of Pendock discussed by Dyer, and by the thirteenth century little woodland survived. But in similar circumstances, where the character of soils or climate precluded significant post-Conquest expansion, extensive tracts of common wood-pasture often remained well into the Middle Ages, and sometimes beyond, as for example in parts of southern and western Hertfordshire or northern Middlesex, or across much of Cheshire.<sup>4</sup> It is these kinds of late-settled woodland landscapes, common across relatively under-populated districts in the west of England and in parts of the south, that have become the model for landscapes of dispersed settlement. But in reality, as should by now be apparent, what we might loosely describe as 'woodland' and 'champion' represent families of landscapes, each with versions or varieties which evolved in contexts of high, medium and low population density.

The varied landscapes of medieval England, although largely structured in a direct manner by the local character of soils and topography, were also a product of broader regional variations in social structure and demography, which were themselves principally a consequence of environmental factors, and especially of climate. The patterns of spatial variation they exhibited were thus complex and varied. As a result, environmental approaches to the medieval landscape lack the simplicity of some recent interpretations, which tend to prioritise just one or two main drivers for landscape change.

<sup>4</sup> Higham, 'Patterns of Settlement in Medieval Cheshire'; Higham, 'Forests, Woodland and Settlement in Medieval Cheshire'.

Many writers have thus emphasised, as I have noted, the central importance of differences in population pressure in generating the diversity of field systems and settlement patterns. Some still argue that nucleated villages and extensive regular open fields came into existence principally as a response to a shortage of grazing land. But as I have emphasised, champion landscapes, especially on lighter land, could boast vast tracts of unploughed ground. Even on the Midland clays some champion townships had little more than a third of their land under crops at any time, even at the height of the medieval population expansion.

Many archaeologists and historians have also given primacy to great magnates or local lords in the making of the medieval landscape, and especially in the development of nucleated villages and their associated field systems. The arguments advanced here, while not denying a role for major landowners, would certainly downplay it. Across large areas of eastern England many villages still mainly comprised sokelands, even at the time of the Norman Conquest; elsewhere, manorial systems may have been a relatively recent development; while in many places, largely perhaps because of the way in which they had developed from several middle-Saxon nuclei, townships commonly came to contain two, three or more manors, rather than being firmly under the control of one. Major alterations to field systems may thus have been effected despite, rather than at the behest of, local lords, as suggested by the few scraps of relevant documentary evidence that we possess (see above, p. 181).

It may anyway be doubted whether leading landowners, either before or after the Conquest, really had the desire to involve themselves in the business of farming, even at one remove. Where their estates lay in both 'woodland' and champion districts, for example, we invariably find that the forms of fields and settlement on each component manor or township were the same as those found in neighbouring places. We get no sense that lordship served to impose on communities modes of agrarian organisation which were alien to the locality. The estates of the abbey of Ely were, by the time of the Conquest, scattered across both sides of the 'woodland'/champion divide in Cambridgeshire and Essex, but there is no sign that the fields and settlements found in such townships were distinctive or different from those typical of the districts in question. Mate's study of the actual operation of medieval agriculture on the estates of Christchurch, Canterbury – the patterns of cropping and the organisation of rotations – similarly showed no overall centralised scheme, each property again following local custom.<sup>5</sup> Agriculture was the business of peasants, not great men. And in a wider, regional sense there is little if any correspondence between tenurial structures, and settlement patterns and field systems. Lincolnshire falls firmly within the champion belt, yet its nucleated villages were in the eleventh and twelfth centuries often occupied by communities of sokemen, whose labour services were light and

<sup>5</sup> M. Mate, 'Medieval Agriculture: The Determining Factors?', *Agricultural History Review* 33 (1985), pp. 22–31.

owed to some distant estate centre. Conversely, much of 'woodland' Essex was characterised by particularly large demesnes, and by bond populations owing some of the heaviest labour services in England.

Contrary to such approaches, this volume has emphasised the role of the peasantry rather than their social superiors in the evolution of regional landscapes – it has championed the importance of the productive base rather than the extractive superstructure. Local and regional landscapes, in the sense of arrangements of fields and settlements, thus arose gradually and naturally from the interaction of local communities with their environments, rather than being imposed by some outside hand in a sudden and arbitrary manner which cut across the particular characteristics of place. They emerged, to coin a phrase, through time and topography.

The kinds of approaches to early-medieval settlement which I have tentatively begun to explore in this volume are also rather more complex than those proposed by a number of researchers over recent years, which seek to explain variations in the medieval landscape as a consequence of fashion and diffusion, or in terms of patterns of ethnic settlement, long-term cultural provinces, or other ill-defined social or cultural factors. Such explanations usually depend on first identifying coherent regions which display a reasonable degree of homogeneity in terms of settlement forms and field systems, and then finding some political, ethnic or social phenomenon which exhibits the same broad spatial patterning. But the landscape regions in question can usually only be characterised by ignoring the exceptional areas within them and suppressing the variety born of the complexities of environmental reality, and the supposed correlations with cultural province, ethnic settlement area, social territory or political unit are only ever partial. Sue Oosthuizen has thus suggested, albeit tentatively, that regular open-field systems, rather than developing towards the end of the Saxon period (as argued here), originated in the eighth century through the activities of Mercian 'kings, nobles and churchmen', in spite of the fact that (as the author herself reminds the reader) their distribution extends far beyond the boundaries of that kingdom while, conversely, in large areas of Mercia very different forms of agrarian organisation developed.<sup>6</sup>

In a similar way, Martin and Satchell's assertion of the importance of the Vikings in the development of champion landscapes is hard to square with the fact that these occur well to the west of any of the proposed areas of Scandinavian settlement, in the heartlands of Wessex.<sup>7</sup> Explanations like these are particularly difficult to reconcile with anomalous areas, such as that found in the south-eastern Midlands. The irregular field systems and dispersed settlements which characterise parts of north Bedfordshire and adjacent areas, and which appear almost as an outpost of the landscapes of 'woodland' Hertfordshire or Essex within the champion Midlands (see

<sup>6</sup> S. Oosthuizen, 'The Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Mercia and the Origins and Distribution of Common Fields', *Agricultural History Review* 55 (2007), pp. 153–80.

<sup>7</sup> Martin and Satchell, *Where Most Enclosures Be*, pp. 226–8.

above, pp. 140–2),<sup>8</sup> might be interpreted as representing an area which Merician kings somehow forgot about, as an enclave of British culture which survived within Gray's Germanised Midlands (a very difficult argument to sustain, given the distribution of early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries), or as a district in which, for some reason, the hand of the Danes rested lightly. It seems easier to attribute its similarity to the 'woodland' districts some 30 kilometres to the south-east to the fact that the geology, soils, rainfall, altitude and hydrological characteristics of the two areas are closely comparable. It is true that the boundaries of cultural provinces evidenced by archaeological distributions, or by spatial patterning in such things as styles of vernacular architecture or local dialects, sometimes appear to coincide with changes in settlement patterns and field systems: good examples of such boundaries are ably discussed by Rippon (the Blackdown Hills) and Martin and Satchell (the 'Gipping Divide').<sup>9</sup> On the face of it such evidence appears to constitute support for the notion of long-term social entities, manifested in apparently coherent packages of agrarian as well as social phenomena. But coincidence of distribution is not evidence of shared causality. Although (as I have argued) different kinds of environmental influence affected different aspects of human behaviour, of necessity the varied frameworks and patterns exhibited by soils, topography and climate were to some extent overlapping. A range of hills might thus constitute, at one and the same time, a boundary to social contact, a junction of soil types and a climatic division (with, for example, a rain shadow in its lee).

All this is not to deny that there was a social dimension to the medieval landscape, that life lived within a village community was different, in many respects, to life lived on an isolated farm. Moreover, the character of local and regional societies clearly did interact in complex ways with environmental factors to create distinctive local landscapes, as Alan Lambourn has recently described so eloquently for the south-west of England.<sup>10</sup> But forms of social organisation were not some autonomous external influence, completely independent of the environment. They were also shaped by climate, soils, hydrology and topography, and by the forms of farming and settlement which these engendered. Nor, as I hope this book has made clear, were relationships between environment and social structures renegotiated from scratch at every stage of development. The character of a landscape was also determined at any one time by patterns inherited from previous periods, when other forms of organisation and structures of power had developed within each district within the same environmental frameworks.

Some of the arguments set out in this book will probably not find much favour with historians and archaeologists. I hope, nevertheless, that the research presented here will encourage others to examine the environmental aspects of regional variation not only in medieval settlement and fields, but

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, *Village and Farmstead*, p. 196.

<sup>9</sup> S. Rippon, *Making Sense of an Historic Landscape* (Oxford, 2012); Martin and Satchell, *Wheare Most Enclosures Be*, pp. 214–26.

<sup>10</sup> A. Lambourn, *Patterning within the Historic Landscape and its Possible Causes* (Oxford, 2010).

also in demography, social structure and culture. Such enquiries, while certainly employing conventional documentary and archaeological evidence, depend in particular on the recognition and interpretation of spatial patterns and recurrent relationships, especially between different elements of the human landscape – farms, fields, commons, woods and the rest. These are areas of research to which, assisted now by digital mapping and the technology of GIS, landscape historians are peculiarly well qualified to contribute. Indeed, the elucidation of such patterns will perhaps add as much to our understanding of early-medieval society as the evidence produced by future excavations, the discovery of new documentary sources or the reinterpretation of old ones. For the early-medieval period, at least, the landscape remains – in Hoskins's oft-quoted words – our 'richest historical record'.





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The Anglo-Saxon period was crucial in the development of England's character: its language, and much of its landscape and culture, were forged in the period between the fifth and the eleventh centuries. Historians and archaeologists have long been fascinated by its regional variations, by the way in which different parts of the country displayed marked differences in social structures, settlement patterns, and field systems. In this controversial and wide-ranging study, the author argues that such differences were largely a consequence of environmental factors: of the influence of climate, soils and hydrology, and of the patterns of contact and communication engendered by natural topography. He also suggests that such environmental influences have been neglected over recent decades by generations of scholars who are embedded in an urban culture and largely divorced from the natural world; and that an appreciation of the fundamental role of physical geography in shaping human affairs can throw much new light on a number of important debates about early medieval society.

The book will be essential reading for all those interested in the character of the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian settlements, in early medieval social and territorial organization, and in the origins of the England's medieval landscapes.

TOM WILLIAMSON is Professor of Landscape History, University of East Anglia; he has written widely on landscape archaeology, agricultural history, and the history of landscape design.

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